A PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH TO ASSESSING MICRO-ENTERPRISE BRAND IMAGE SIGNALS

University of Chester

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Dian Wang

October 2021

Declaration

The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

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Date: 29th Oct 2021

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Parts of this thesis has been presented at academic conferences or published; this includes:

- Wang, D. (2020, September). *The Branding of Micro Enterprises: UK and China.* British Academy of Management (BAM). Paper accepted and presented at 2020 Conference in The Cloud, UK.

- Wang, D. (2019, November). *Brand Association in Micro-Enterprise: International Perspective*. Post session presented at Doctoral Day of The Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE) Conference 2019. Newcastle, UK.

- Wang, D. (2019, May). *Brand Associations and the Micro-entrepreneur.* Oral presentation presented at the 2019 Gary Davies Branding Symposium, Shanghai, China.

- Wang, D. (2018, September). *Understanding the Role of Personal Reputation to Firm Performance*. Oral presentation presented at the BAM Conference 2018, Chester, UK.

Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking University of Chester's Business Research Institute and The China Centre for recruiting me as a research staff. Without financial support, I certainly would not have been able to complete a full-time PhD programme. I am grateful to work and study there and developed with my lovely team.

The best supervisor ever and forever is Professor Gary Davies. I am so blessed and lucky to work with him. He is definitely the greatest angel sent from God. Allow me to express my appreciation to Professor Davies humbly, for his extensive offering and selfless devotion throughout the three years of supervision even after he retires from the University. Pushing people like me really hurts the brain, I thank him for consuming energy and time to train me, I shall remember his kindness for the rest of my life.

I would like to thank another supervisor of mine, Professor Wing Lam for inspiring my research interests and topic ideas. Also, I thank Professor Lam for offering valuable help and the most thoughtful arrangements from my day one to her leaves. I would like also to acknowledge Professor Kelvin Leong, my new principal supervisor, I thank him for his warm support in my write-up through to the submission.

Special thanks also go to Professor Phil Harris with his continuous support and encouragement. I want to extend thanks to Dr Henry Sidsaph, Sen Yang, Sally Williamson for their substantial support too. Besides, I want to thank my fellow peers, research participants, staff colleagues from Study Skills and librarians at the University and other academics who also generously lend me their support in terms of this project.

A big thank you goes to my lovely parents for their wise counsel and sympathetic ear. Thanks go to my uncle Bing, my grandparents, my cousins, my besties with my heart. Finally, I thank everyone else as they provided stimulating discussion and happy distraction, but I cannot run out of space to nominate them all here.

A Practical and Theoretical Approach to Assessing Micro-enterprise Brand Image Signals

Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate how Micro Enterprises (MEs) communicate their brand image to their markets. The research takes a comparative approach and examines firms in both the UK and China.

The main theoretical base for the work is that of the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) which holds that entities with humanistic associations (including brands and corporate brands) are automatically judged for their ‘warmth’ (trustworthiness, sincerity, supportiveness) and their ‘competence’ (effectiveness, efficiency). The status (prestigious, glamorous) of the entity is also included in the SCM model but as an antecedent to competence judgements. Recent work alternatively considers it as a dimension of imagery which is automatically judged by customers.

The methodology is a mixed method and has three interlinked pieces of work, the first two of which are more exploratory and the last more confirmatory. A case study approach first explored the signalling of 14 MEs using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with their owner-managers. A thematic analysis of content showed that managers emphasize their competence and that fewer provided unprompted examples of status positioning.

The second study involved the content analysis of parts of 66 ME websites labelled ‘who we are’ or similar. Competence descriptors were again the most frequent followed by warmth and then status items. The two studies evidence that MEs signal competence, warmth, and status but in that order of emphasis.

An experimental study was conducted where the status signalling of a fictitious ME (a gift company) was manipulated. It explored why MEs use the signal less and test whether this changes the perceived competence of the company and the purchase intention and person-brand congruence of potential customers. The increase in status did not increase competence and it reduced outcome behaviour and warmth. As warmth explains consumer attitude best, using the status signal can reduce potential sales. This holds regardless of country (the UK and China), and control variable values. However, perceived higher prices and giving too much irrelevant information mediated and therefore explain the effect of status on consumer attitude. The main effects were positive, but the indirect effects were negative due to perceived higher prices and irrelevant information. Finally, all variables considered in this study were tested using Structural Equation Modelling, adding to the insights from the final study

The primary contribution is to better understand how MEs communicate their imagery to their market. SCM thinking is also tested and developed in the context of ME marketing and recommendations made for its adaption.

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List of Abbreviations

MEs: Micro-enterprises

SMEs: Small and medium-sized enterprises

SCM: Stereotype Content Theory

IFC: International Finance Corporation

EU: European Union

OECD: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

BIS: The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Micro-enterprises (MEs) are within the very large business population of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The term refers to very small businesses that operate on a very small scale. MEs represent a substantial portion of the business establishments in the world, strongly driving the growth of the economy, innovation and employment (International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2017). They are seen as a pathway for entrepreneurship because they contribute to the self-confidence and empowerment of entrepreneurs (Liedholm & Mead, 2013); more importantly their contribution builds social cohesion and economic stability (Kumar, 2010; Wennekers & Thurik, 1999). The potential contributions of MEs are to household income, welfare as well as distributional or developmental objectives (Liedholm & Mead, 2013).

MEs are also the backbone of the European Union (EU)´s economy in terms of the composition of the business population (Eurostat, 2006). MEs, as the most frequent type of firm, constitute 93 percent of all enterprises in the EU. 99% of EU business are small and medium-sized enterprises, of which 90% are ME businesses that employ less than 10 people (European Commission, 2009). Micro and small businesses have a pivotal role in achieving the economic wellbeing of the UK as they constitute a large share of British national business and are a major source of employment (Capik & Brockerhoff, 2017; Fielden et al., 2000). At the beginning of 2021, the UK economy consisted of around 5.6 million private sector businesses, where 5.5 million of them are small (0 to 49 employees), and employment in small businesses was 12.9 million (48%) and turnover £1.6 trillion (36%). It is notable that the number of micro businesses has also increased 4% since 2017 (BIS, 2020). The ME sector has benefited from increased information technology skills (Ganotakis, 2012), which are demonstrated by a recent boom in MEs such as online home-based businesses (Anwar & Daniel, 2017).

MEs also play an increasingly important role in developing economies such as China. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2016), SME businesses are spread throughout all major sectors with the service sector accounting for 60.2%, 18.5% in manufacturing, 5% in construction industry and 3.2% in agriculture related industries. The current Mass Entrepreneurship Initiative by China's government has enhanced market access by encouraging the development of micro and small business through lending tax exemptions and related support (World Bank, 2019). The contribution of MEs to economic growth is far from negligible (Chen, 2006; Gibb & Li, 2003; Shao & Sun, 2021). The recognition of a transformed market environment in China since the 2000s has changed people's perception of entrepreneurship, and the continued private-sector development, and particularly MSME growth, has become a dominating force in the Chinese economy (Dai et al., 2019). There is a high presence of MEs in the economy, consisting of various business types including self-employed small-retail and services, and a new generation of new industries in both urban and rural locations (Chen, 2006; Dai et al., 2019; Welsh et al., 2013).

However, a large number of MEs operate outside of any government system of regulation so that official statistics could underestimate the number of MEs (Mead & Liedholm, 1998), and the marginal nature of many MEs effectively restricts the ability of governments to incorporate them into policies and strategies in pursuit of national socio- economic goals. Due to the vulnerability of entrepreneurs, MEs are often more challenged than their larger competitors (Mead & Liedholm 1998; Servon, 2006). It is necessary for all small businesses to promote positive messages and the circulation of proper information to help convince potential customers to purchase services and products from the business (Williams, 2006). However, research has consistently shown that MEs and small businesses generally lack the awareness and capacity needed to create a strong brand (Kennedy & Wright, 2016; Merrilees, 2007), many small business owners fail to understand how to effectively incorporate branding into their marketing activities and to manage their brand image communication effectively.

As a key driver of brand equity, brand image can be predominant when consumers make purchase decisions (Zhang, 2015). Brand image refers to the perceptions that consumers hold about brands, and it is an important part of consumer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993). The term ‘brand’ incorporates a business’s trademark logo, symbol, and packaging but it also holds symbolic meaning (Bennett, 1995) and has perceptual aspects which help identify and differentiate a business from competitors (Aaker, 1996; Keller et al., 2008). Image, as a construct, also reflects both the cognitive representations of objective entities (Da Silva & Alwi, 2008) and socially constructed and cultural-based subjective impressions (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995), which create both functional and emotional values (Kapferer, 2008). Wijaya (2013) claims brand image is related to the decoding process of any communication, which is interpreted by consumers who then actualise and construct a picture in both mind and reality.

A prominent brand is a key feature of established corporates who invest in and manage their image (Balmer & Gray, 2003); however, as mentioned earlier, branding is relatively underrated in smaller businesses. Recent trends encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship have led to a proliferation of studies that open new opportunities for researching enterprise creation, small business management, family-owned and minority group businesses from a branding perspective (Berthon et al., 2008; Centeno et al., 2019; Nwankwo et al., 2012; Schellong et al., 2019).

1.2 Research Focus

There are many available techniques for measuring brand image in the branding literature (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Plumeyer et al., 2019). Compared to taking financial performance as an approach to understand brand image, a non-financial performance approach, which refers to brand image and associations, is more related to a consumer perspective (Zhang, 2015). In consumer behaviour and marketing research, researching the dimensions of brand personality is one of the most used tools to measure brand image (Cian, 2011). Brand personality resembles a set of human personality characteristics (Sirgy, 1985). Under the umbrella concept of brand equity, brand image and brand personality are associated with each other, a brand personality is regarded as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand, which commonly consist of a number of dimensions such as: competence, sincerity, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997).

Although the notion of the personification of brand has been questioned due to the issues of concept validity and some problematic items such as social status (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003), Davies et al., (2001) replicated and developed the original pioneering brand personality scale (Aaker, 1997) for corporate brands. In 2018, a more universal and culture generic measure was empirically tested (Davies et al., 2018), which emerged from signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Erdem et al., 2006; Spence, 1973) and the stereotype content model (SCM) (Fiske, 2018; Kervyn et al., 2012). This identified three dimensions warmth (e.g. friendly and agreeable), competence (e.g. competent, effective and efficient) and status (e.g. prestigious, elegant and sophisticated) as essential dimensions (Davies et al., 2018).

Clearly, managing brand image can be crucial for the success of MEs marketing communication, but do they recognise this and is there a route they should all consider? Marketers and researchers are also warning that the traditional clustering of MEs within SMEs would be dangerous as this ignores the uniqueness of the ME sub-category (Van Hoang et al., 2018). This research builds upon prior work in the mainstream of marketing and branding (e.g. Davies et al., 2018) by applying it to the context of MEs. The main theoretical perspectives are from the SCM (Fiske, 2018; Kervyn et al., 2012) as it has been applied to branding and signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). The purpose of this first chapter is to introduce the structure of the thesis, first it’s questions, aims and objectives.

1.3 Research Aim & Objectives

The questions implied from the literature review are whether MEs signal warmth, competence and status to their markets and if not, why not? This study addresses a number of research objectives in order to address the question regarding how MEs manage their brand image and specifically whether they do so through communicating warmth, competence and status to their markets. These are:

1 To identify the characteristics and issues relating to microenterprises in their brand image communication.

2 To evaluate critically models and theories relevant to microenterprises in coping with brand image communication.

3 To explore owner-manager views and real-life practices related to brand image communication in an international context.

4 To experimentally test the adoption of relevant models and theories.

5 To formulate recommendations for microenterprise branding.

In order to understand ME branding, it is felt necessary to gain an insight into the characteristics of MEs, the issues and challenges facing their brand image communication (Objective 1). Further this research will assess existing conceptualisations of MEs to understand these definitions, and how MEs are organised and managed as a business. More importantly, this research will review literature on the marketing, branding and the role of brand communication which is most relevant to the ME context.

Secondly, the research aim will be achieved by evaluating ME brand personality by adopting the SCM (Objective 2 Literature Review Chapter 2). A research vehicle in this study is the collection and analysis of empirical data (Objective 3 and 4). The overall methodology and corresponding research design will be justified in Chapter 3. I will then explore how the owner-managers of MEs communicate to their customers in an international context, with reference to the SCM and signalling theory. The initial research strategy will be exploratory (see Chapter 4). The final approach is confirmatory and uses a quantitative approach to testing the role of status signalling a major issue which emerged from the more exploratory phase (see Chapter 5).

Finally, as a result of the Literature Review and analysis of both phases, recommendations to MEs owner-managers and entrepreneurs will be discussed as an output (Objective 5 and Chapter 6).

1.4 Value of this Research

The importance of research in the field of small business branding becomes even more apparent when the views of other researchers are considered who mourn the lack of research in this area (Juntunen et al., 2010; Sandbacka et al., 2013). The research will also make an original contribution to the brand personality domain (Aaker, 1997; Davies et al., 2018) by conducting a critical investigation of the signalling of warmth, competence and status dimensions (Connelly et al., 2011; Fiske, 2018; Kervyn et al., 2012) in the ME sector. Particularly, the controversial role of status will be examined (Davies et al., 2018; Fiske, 2018). The review of the ME literature and brand personality literature provide a coherent perspective on ME branding that has previously received scant attention.

In terms of the added value from the empirical research, this mixed-method research is unique and will provide a valuable insight into ME branding in an international context. This research will also complement the work of others who have used only qualitative or quantitative data. The owner-managers of MEs and entrepreneurs will benefit from this work when comparing and contrasting brand personality dimensions and associated theories with practice.

1.5 Outline Structure

The overall structure of the study takes the form of seven chapters as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter aims to provide the reader with background information on the relevance of brand image to marketing communication and promotion in the micro-enterprise environment. The focus of this research is discussed and justified, and the overall research aim and individual research objectives are identified.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter comprehensively defines the term micro-enterprise (ME), discusses recent research interest in this field, clarifies the need for researching ME marketing using the central concept of brand, evaluates theories and models on marketing communication and brand image, and justifies the need for empirical data on signalling brand image issues all in a cultural comparison context between UK and China. The chapter justifies in particular why the author focuses on three dimensions of brand image/personality, warmth, competence and status. The theoretical context for the research is discussed and critically appraised.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter is concerned with the methodologies used for this study. I discuss the traditional research paradigms and justify the choice of adopting a mixed methods research approach and across two cultures, the UK and China. I justify the main phases addressed in this thesis: individual interviews, websites' content analysis as exploratory and the experimental design which follows as being more confirmatory in nature.

Chapter 4: Study I – Individual Interviews

This chapter discusses and justifies the research strategy and data collection techniques (semi-structured interviews) adopted in the empirical collection of data for this study phase. Details on the sample are provided. After conducting qualitative thematic analysis and content analysis of the data, I then report on the findings from the interviews. The results of how MEs communicate brand image and whether they signal warmth, competence and status will be presented. Comparing both UK and China, the relative frequency and discourse themes of each type of signal is a point of discussion.

Chapter 5: Study II – Website Content

This chapter discusses and justifies the research strategy and data collection techniques (website content text) adopted in the empirical collection of data for this study phase. Details on the samples are provided, MEs in both the UK and China. After analysing the data, I then report on the findings. The frequency of brand image signalling of the three dimensions, warmth competence and status and cultural differences are key points for discussion.

Chapter 6: Study III – Experimental Design

This chapter discusses and justifies the research strategy (experimental design) and data collection techniques (online questionnaires) adopted in the empirical collection of data for this study phase which is more confirmatory. The 2x2 design manipulates status signalling by an ME across two cultures, the UK and China and measures the effects among potential customers. Details of the sample are provided. After conducting quantitative statistical analysis for the data, I then report on the findings. I will discuss the effects of signalling status on consumer behaviour considering the culture difference and other variables. The questionnaire used in the survey is appended to the thesis. Finally, a structural equation model is used to test whether there are any further useful insights from the data and the content of thought protocols provided by respondents is analysed.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This chapter revisits the overall aim and specific objectives of this research study. The findings are summarized and related to the specific research objectives: MEs' brand image communication; theoretical models/frameworks to support signalling brand image, empirical investigation of owner-managers' practice as well as the experiment of signalling status and examines the cultural effects between the UK and China. Conclusions from this research work are derived and linked to the research objectives and prior work, and based on these conclusions, recommendations are made. The limitations of this work are also highlighted. Importantly, the issue of managing the implementation of the recommendations is addressed.

Chapter 8 Limitation, Future Research & Contributions

This chapter states the limitations of the research and directions for future research. The contribution of this research to knowledge is also clarified.

References

This section contains an alphabetical listing of the sources referred to in this work. The American Psychological Association system of referencing (APA 7th) is used.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This Literature Review will examine prior work surrounding brand image communication within the business marketing environment. It will then look specifically at the challenges facing microenterprises. The chapter focuses on two of the five objectives for the thesis: objectives 1 and 2 below (the third and the fourth objectives will be met through the vehicle of empirical data collection and analysis while the final objective -objective 5 – is derived as a result of the findings from objective 1,2, 3, 4):

1 To identify the characteristics and issues relating to microenterprises in their brand image communication.

2 To evaluate critically models and theories relevant to microenterprises in coping with brand image communication.

3 To explore owner-manager views and real-life practices related to brand image communication in an international context.

4 To experimentally test the adoption of relevant models and theories.

5 To formulate recommendations for microenterprise branding.

By examining the literature, the needs driving microenterprises to engage in marketing communication and specifically brand image communication, together with the benefits to their owner-managers and other stakeholders, will be evaluated. In developing its conceptual model, the study draws on the recent developments in literature, including theories and works associated with the fields of entrepreneurship, marketing, and strategy but particularly the theoretical model of the Stereotype Content Model. General issues and problems in the branding communication of microenterprises will be considered, such as their lack of entrepreneurial capital, their weak position in the market, and changes in consumer behaviour cross-culturally.

Importantly, guidelines to support microenterprises and their owner-managers when deriving promotional communication will be identified. At the end of this chapter the reader will be better informed about the areas chosen for the empirical research in the field of measuring the brand image of microenterprises as well as factors regarding how consumers perceive and evaluate an ME's brand that follow in subsequent chapters. The chapter considers a wide range of literature to support the thesis as a whole and also the methodologies used in the chapters reporting empirical work.

A sensible starting point is to investigate what is meant by the term 'microenterprise'. The main topic in this chapter will be the marketing phenomenon referred to as branding communication – seen by many as the use of brand image signalling.

2.2 ME Definitions & History of the ME Landscape

The term microenterprise (ME), refers to an important cluster within small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A microenterprise (micro-enterprise), also known as a microbusiness (micro-business) or micro firm, can be loosely defined as any business that operates on a very small scale.

Broadly, there are two perspectives used when defining an ME. From a more qualitative perspective, as a ME is an enterprise managed by an owner-manager, and the strategic decisions tend to be made by each owner-manager, an ME is characterized by great independence in terms of personal decision-making (Bolton, 1971). In a more quantitative sense, it is very difficult to make valid comparisons of the importance of MEs between various countries, as there is a degree of uncertainty in the definitions used for an ME (Storey, 2016). There are some quantitative thresholds: headcount, turnover, and balance-sheet value (Sharma et al., 1990; Stokes et al., 2010). Enterprises are often grouped according to their maximum number of employees and financial indicators, but these figures can also vary by industry and country (Linggaputri et al., 2018).

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) has compiled a matrix for the definitions of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) used internationally, including MEs (Table 2.1). Generally micro enterprises are defined as enterprises with the owner doing the business and employing less than 10 people (Linggaputri et al., 2018).

Table 2-1 - IFC MSME Definition

Indicator	Employees	Total Assets US$	Annual Sales US$
Micro enterprise	< 10	<$100,000	<$100,000
Small enterprise	10-49	$100,000 - < $3 million	$100,000 - < $3 million
Medium enterprise	50-300	$3 million -$15 million	$3 million -$15 million

Adapted from “IFC’s Definitions of Targeted Sectors” by IFC, 2020 (https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/Industry_EXT_Content/IFC_External_Corporate_Site/Financial+Institutions/Priorities/IFCs+Definitions+of+Targeted+Sectors)

The most common criterion used to define an ME is the number of employees. This is probably because information about other size-indicators such as output, sales, etc., is difficult to access, as most ME owner-managers may not want to share their accounting books or do not maintain formal records at all, as may be the case in many developing countries. Further, individual studies can use slightly different numbers as thresholds, making the distinction between micro, small and medium enterprises far less strict (Reeg, 2013). In the EU, within the SME category, a microenterprise is officially classified as a business that employs fewer than ten individuals and with an annual turnover of not more than two million Euros (Union, 2015). This definition is widely adopted including in both the UK (Department for Business, 2020; Shah, Long & Ganji, 2017; Union, 2015) and China (Gibb & Li, 2003; Welsh et al., 2013). Table 2.2 and 2.3 provide the definitions used in the UK and China (the two countries where the empirical work in this thesis is located) respectively.

Throughout this thesis, the term ‘Micro-enterprise’ is then used to refer to an enterprise which:

1. (a) employs fewer than 10 persons; and
2. (b) has a turnover that does not exceed €2 million

Table 2-2 - Definitions of MSMEs Clusters in the UK

Size of Business	Criteria
Micro business	Private sector business with 9 or less employees.
Small business	Private sector business with less than 50 employees.
Medium-size business	Private sector business with between 50 and 249 employees.

Adapted from "Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2020: statistical release" by Department of Business, 2020 (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2020)

Table 2-3 - Definitions of SMEs in China

	Medium Business		Small Business		Micro-enterprises	
Sector/Size	No. of Workers	Operating income (RMB)	No. of Workers	Operating income (RMB)	No. of Workers	Operating income (RMB)
Manufacturing Industry	300 or more	20m or more	20 or more	3m or more	Less than 20	3m or less
Construction Industry	..	60m or more	..	50m or more	Less than 10	50m or less
Postal Industry	100 or more	10m or more	20 or more	1m or more	Less than 20	1m or less
Information Transmission Industry	100 or more	10m or more	10 or more	1m or more	Less than 10	1m or less
Software and Information Service Industry	100 or more	10m or more	10 or more	500k or more	Less than 10	500k or less
Leasing and Business Service Industry	100 or more	80m or more	10 or more	1m or more	Less than 10	1m or less

Adapted from "Financing SMEs and Entrepreneurs 2016: An OECD Scoreboard" by OECD 2016 (https://doi.org/10.1787/fin_sme_ent-2016-en)

Characterised by centralised ownership, flatter organisational structures as well as more informal management styles, MEs can be very flexible and innovative, adjusting their strategy to the changing needs of consumers very quickly. MEs are likely to have shorter chains of command, are closer to the customer and have fewer delays between problem recognition and action (Bumgardner et al., 2011). They can connect between large suppliers and consumers and are therefore essential for the functioning of the economy (Sommerville & Thomas, 2009). For example, small convenience stores can link large corporate suppliers to their customers. MEs tend to grow faster, having greater innovative potential and may be more profitable than larger size enterprises (Jamak et al., 2017).

However, along with the critical barriers of fewer financial and human resources, MEs are deemed as particularly vulnerable when facing competition or a crisis because it is more difficult for them to downsize, as they are already small (Van Hoang et al., 2018). Consequently, MEs exhibit very high rates of births and deaths. Much of the current literature on MEs pays particular attention to their sources of funding and credit strategy to close any finance gap and achieve higher growth (Khanna et al., 2017). On the other hand, a lack of intangible resources such as entrepreneurial competence, social capital and networks can have a negative impact on attracting and retaining stakeholders, and on promoting and leveraging these enterprises (Muzychenko, 2008; Muniady et al., 2014). This thesis will focus on the issue of how MEs promote themselves and more specifically, how they communicate their brand imagery.

Research into MEs probably dates from the late 1970s and in Bangladesh when they were seen as a way to provide people in need with a way to sustain themselves financially and economically (Midgley, 2008). Muhammad Yunus developed the Grameen Bank in 1976 to provide microloan financing to impoverished people—many of them women (Bornstein, 1997). Since then, a number of organizations have developed microenterprise programs, many catering to people in developing nations.

The associations made with running a new ME venture have partially changed since these early days. In previous decades, most MEs specialized in providing goods or services for their local areas and most ME owners were primarily interested in earning a living to support themselves and their families (Midgley, 2008). The image of running MEs was traditionally associated with less competitiveness but cheaper cost. Now in Europe and in some developing countries, such small enterprises are more frequently associated with industrial supply chains in dynamic industries (Stock et al., 2000); they are often active in technology and innovation growth and contribute significantly to the economy (Martín-Tapia et al., 2010; Simpson, 2001).

Not surprisingly there has been considerable and growing research interest in the ME sector. Perhaps the dominant focus has been on the owners of micro-enterprises both within the ME literature and that specifically in that on entrepreneurship. Such managers are typified as being more interested in the long-term development of their local economy, whilst those in large organisations with shareholders and specialist management, are more concerned with short-term profit and boosting turnover that facilitates long term objectives (Greenbank, 2001).

Top ME research topics are mainly related to economic growth, finance and management. These themes have included the success factors of the ME (Perren, 1999; Jamak et al., 2017; McPherson & Liedholm, 1996; Poutziouris, 2003; Simpson et al., 2004). One of the most referred to streams has examined their finance and funding (Berger & Udell, 1998; Lund, 2002; Mosley, 2001; Navajas et al., 2000; Von Pischke, 1996). In a recent trend, ME research has also focussed on their role in E-commerce and digital technology (Al-Qirim, 2007; Jagun et al., 2008; Lewis & Cockrill, 2002; Roberts & Wood, 2002). A significant number of ME studies are from a female perspective (De Mel et al., 2009; Ehlers & Main, 1998; Kevane & Wydick, 2001), and some consider international and cultural aspects (Allal & Finnegan, 1999; Cahn, 2008).

2.3 Entrepreneurship, Strategy & Marketing

There is a large and growing body of literature concerning the interrelationship between entrepreneurship, marketing and strategy (Hills & LaForge, 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003; Lodish et al., 2002; Lumpkin et al., 2010). The incorporation and integration of marketing within the SME entrepreneurship literature has been highlighted, suggesting that marketing can be a core function in successful entrepreneurship and that marketing activities need an enterprising culture to be operated smoothly (Lam & Harker, 2015).

The Entrepreneurship literature attempts to explain the relationship between the entrepreneur and new venture formation. There are several significant conceptual contributions in the domain: from economics, personality within psychology and strategy (Mitchell et al., 2002). Historically, research investigating Entrepreneurship in the context of small businesses has focused on the individual characteristics and personality traits of entrepreneurs (Brazeal & Herbert, 1999) and the likelihood of people with certain traits to form businesses and for these to be successful. In the review of Bruyat and Julien (2001), a focus on the entrepreneur, in terms of creating new enterprises is seen as having a dominating position in today's entrepreneurship literature, though the foundations were laid by the perspectives of economists (Schumpeter, 2000). During the past 35 years, the importance of entrepreneurial personality which emerged from researching human characteristics or traits of the entrepreneurs, has called attention to the contributions of people themselves to the entrepreneurial process (Mitchell et al., 2002). Since then, scholars have started to pay more attention to their strategic management and entrepreneurial skills, which are believed to connect the performance of the venture itself rather than just their personality (Mitchell et al., 2002; Stevenson & Jarillo, 2007).

The strategy of a business incorporates both its surrounding environmental characteristics and internal business capabilities, which includes those of the entrepreneur. Mainstream strategy research aims to explain what determines firm performance, and to identify what affects firm strategy (Farjoun, 2002). Industrial-organisation theory holds that the external environment is a constraint when formulating a strategy (Porter, 1991). Focusing on unique resource and specific valuable capabilities, the resource-based view examines certain resource attributes which enable cost leadership and sustained competitive advantage (Teece et al., 1997). Thus, the focus on the capabilities of the entrepreneur in the literature can be seen as compatible with the mainstream of strategic thought.

However, there are other perspectives, one of which is that from Marketing. The definition of marketing has evolved. As an important facet of all organizational activity, Kotler and Levy (1969, p.10) popularized the term marketing as a “pervasive societal activity” which goes beyond just selling and influencing consumers while serving and satisfying human needs. Kotler et al. (2020) defined the term marketing as the process by which businesses engage customers, build stronger relationships and create customer value in order to extract revenue from them. Similarly, marketing is also regarded as the process of conceptualising, pricing, promoting, and distributing ideas, goods, and services in order to produce and exchange value and meet individual and organisational goals (De Pelsmacker et al., 2017).

The existing literature on marketing is extensive and focuses particularly on empowering consumers, on their experience and on relational theories (Achrol & Kotler, 2012; Day & Montgomery, 1999; Firat et al., 1995). Early examples of research into marketing theories include the exchange paradigm as in the form of goods, services, personages, places or ideas, and whether it is between individuals, for profit and non-profit firms, governments and NGOs (Achrol & Kotler, 2012). Traditionally, the focus used to be on the product with its "crystallization of value" for satisfying consumer needs (Firat et al., 1995, p.42). With the changing needs of customers and of the environment traditional academic ideas on marketing were challenged to reconsider the real consumer needs and consumer relationship management (Day & Montgomery, 1999).

This thesis adopts a marketing perspective, rather than one based on the characteristics of the owner-manager to help open up the conversation within the marketing domain, in particular within its subfield of brand image communication and its application to the ME. Brand image communication is a part of the larger area of marketing communication.

2.4 Marketing Communications

Marketing and communication theory share a number of key features (Nandan, 2005). Duncan and Moriarty (1998) found when comparing marketing and communication that they are essentially parallel and enrich each other. Communication, as described by Schramm (cited by Buttle, 1995), is a process that enables the transmitting of information, where a commonness is established through the encoding of the message and decoding from a receiver based on a source. Schramm stated that audiences are not passive and defenceless therefore the communication process should be seen as two separate acts, one performed by a communicator and one by the receiver (Buttle, 1995). Historically, communication is deemed as the act of revealing threats and opportunities that affect the value position of society's component parts (as cited in Buttle, 1995).

Effective communication happens when the receiver's decoding of a message content yields the same meaning as intended by the encoder (Buttle, 1995). The concerns brought about by communication errors rarely result in something as serious as death, however the rejection of messages, misunderstandings and misinterpretation can cost a company its market share, survival, and jobs if they are allowed to continue unchecked (Smith et al., 2011).

2.4.1 Defining Marketing Communication

Although differences of opinion still exist, there appears to be some agreement that the goals of marketing communication are engagement, audience-oriented and response-care (Duncan & Moriarty 1998; Petersen et al., 2015). Marketing communications is deemed to be the process by which businesses and their target audiences try to communicate with one another (Fill & Turnbull, 2019). The latter authors argued that participants attempt to build and present messages before analysing and responding depending on their understanding of the communication contexts that an audience prefers. What is agreed regarding the attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural responses in Buttle's review, is that marketing communication comprises "a set of interpersonal and mediated communicative practices which are designed to produce cognitive, affective or behavioural outcomes in specified target audiences which may be internal or external to the organization." (Buttle, 1995, p.297).

2.4.2 Marketing Communication & Branding

Buttle (1995) claimed that marketing communication came to be seen as a relationship, an act of sharing instead of something that someone else does. Keller (1993) argued that marketing communication is the voice of a brand which shapes consumer perceptions of the product and service. In maintaining brand relationships, likewise, communication is the most important component in that interactivity and when consumer care are taken into consideration (Duncan & Moriarty 1998). Zailskaite-Jakste and Minelgaite (2021) advocated that firms should create company-created utilitarian content that will engage consumers and facilitate long-term brand loyalty.

2.4.3 Changing Environment & Integration of Marketing Communications

The success of entrepreneurial activities lie in customer demand (Burns, 2016), it therefore can be argued that the marketing communications of MEs should be evaluated by its customers.

Most recently scholars have used the term “integrated marketing communications” to refer to the idea that a firm should be concerned to ensure that all its communications are coherent. Kitchen and Burgmann (2015) traced the development of integrated marketing communications from the situation described by Buttle (1995) where the focus was on communication theory, to the modern context where “To create a competitive brand, coordination between all communication disciplines is mandatory”. This places the brand at the heart of marketing communications and implies that the brand is a source of integration for all customer communication.

Recent developments in thinking about the integration of marketing communication have heightened the need for congruence between a consumer-held brand image and a business intended brand identity (Madhavaram et al., 2005). The changes experienced by relationship building over the past decade remain unprecedented, following a new generation of marketing approaches focusing on consumers, integrated marketing, and integrated marketing communications (Duncan & Moriarty 1998). In the evolving theories of integrated and relationship marketing, communication is an integral process that is central to marketing (Duncan & Moriarty 1998). Marketing communication is now an integral part of the overall communications and relationship management strategy of an organisation, rather than simply providing product information (Fill & Turnbull 2019).

As the marketing communication environment is changing, especially the large scale digital media, extensive research has shown that modern marketing communication has evolved (Mulhern, 2013). Social Media, in particular, encourages businesses to think about the role of consumer engagement behaviour in the marketing communication process where consumers consume, contribute and create as they broaden their understanding of the sources of brand equity (Zailskaite-Jakste &

Minelgaite, 2021). For the ME much of what is written about marketing communication may seem aspirational in that ME’s lack the budgets of large corporates and often seek to appeal locally, rather than nationally or internationally. Many have, as will be revealed in the empirical work presented later, embraced modern approaches and in particular the use of websites to promote themselves and communicate to existing and potential clients.

The other developing orientation of marketing communications reflects the change from a company’s internal concepts (the so-called 4 Ps) to consumer-oriented factors (the 4 Cs). Fill (2006) suggests that instead of being company- or product-oriented, discipline-driven or media-directed, marketing communications should be an audience-centred activity. Traditionally, the marketer has a variety of tools at his disposal: the marketing mix instruments that the 4 Ps model splits into four groups: Promotion, Product, Price and Place (Perreault & McCarthy, 2002). To develop consumer oriented marketing, these instruments have been developed and adapted into 4 Cs (Consumer wants and needs, Cost, Convenience, and Communication) of a new marketing mix (De Pelsmacker et al., 2017).

As consumers are raised in a certain culture and are accustomed to that culture's values and ideas, they will react to marketing materials differently, however there is an unconscious tendency among marketers and marketing communications managers to refer to their own cultural values (De Pelsmacker et al., 2017). The evolution of western culture from pre-industrial to post-industrial or consumer society today closely relates to institutional change, which indicates a need to understand the cumulative impact of marketing communication on culture (Buttle, 1995). It is suggested that we can analyse the social world and marketing communications on a number of systemic levels at family/household, institutional and cultural levels (Buttle, 1995). Petersen et al. (2015) suggest that businesses should take account of culture when managing consumers as culture directly affects the decision-making of consumers and moderates the impact of companies’ marketing (Petersen et al., 2015). As detailed below, this thesis accepts the need to consider the potential influence of culture.

2.4.4 Marketing Communication Theories in the 20th Century

Buttle (1995) summarised five fundamental theories or models in the field of marketing communications in the 20th century. The traditional “5W” communication model was that of Harold Lasswell (1948, as cited in Buttle, 1995) which describes communication as a series of questions with central issues of communication: “who (says)?" (control analysis), “What is it that been said?” (content analysis), “Which channel does it go through?” (media analysis), “To whom?” (audience analysis), “What is the result?” (effect analysis). The model by Lasswell identifies the famous construct which comprises a source (referring to the company) that encodes the message (referring to the product), the channel or medium via which the message is conveyed (referring to the distribution system), noise that interferes with communication processing (referring to the clutter of competing products and claims), a receiver (the customer) who decodes it, and feedback that communicates the receiver's response back to the source (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). However, critics have argued that this is a "linear model" overlooking the construct's intricacy and oversimplifying its purpose (Sapienza et al., 2015).

The data transmission model, a highly mechanistic model of communication, was proposed by Shannon and Weaver (1948, 1949). The authors define communication as a signal transmission process that begins when a source of information chooses a desired message from a collection of alternatives (Buttle, 1995), and then the transmitter converts this message into a signal, which is subsequently delivered from the transmitter to the reception and its destination via the communication channel (often with noise). The brain is the source of speech communication, while the voice mechanism is the transmitter (Buttle, 1995).

Later on, Schramm's source-message-receiver model and its extensions received more attention as it is more applicable to the complexities of human communication. This model has mostly been used in research into mass communications and, in marketing, notably in the study of mass media advertising. According to Schramm (1954, 1971), communication is the study of individuals in relationships. All communication must operate within a larger framework of social interactions, which he defines as consisting of four elements: the sender-receiver physical/ geographical link, the situational environment, role expectations, and social norms (Buttle, 1995). The construct investigates the interpersonal interaction, specifically two-person or dyadic interaction (Webster 1968).

Berlo (1960) emphasises that communication is a multidimensional and interdisciplinary process. To make it accessible, it is vital to 'stop the dynamic of the process' (p.25). The communication source, the encoder, the message, the channel, the decoder, and the communication receiver are the next six 'ingredients' listed by Berlo. Berlo then expands on this model of communication by addressing topics such as encoding/decoding fidelity, message composition, and communication channels (Buttle 1995).

The assessment of the transmission of the study of group influences on an individual's response to communication is then developed from general communication theory (Webster 1968). Klapper (1960), from a mass communication perspective, argues that modelling influences work by means of a two-stage diffusion process in theories of mass communication. Influential people take new ideas from the media and transmit them through their own influence their followers. Klapper supports that media can only strengthen existing behavioural styles, without creating new ones (as cited by Buttle, 1995).

All of the theories above are useful to help understand the phenomenon of communication and specifically their application into marketing but have certain limitations. According to Buttle (1995), these models focus on the individual level and as a result of miss out the cumulative impact of family, institutional and cultural levels.

Secondly, another main concern is the potentially exaggerated effect of single messages or campaigns in marketing, which may result in ignoring the capacity of symbolical interactions and other decision-making variables such as product design and price decisions (Buttle, 1995). Thirdly, the theories focus too much on the intentionality of sources and there are certain problems with the overlooking of active audience, interpretive community, meaning attribution (Buttle, 1995). Fourthly, it remains problematic to claim that communication may be said to be effective when decoding the content of the message by the recipient has the same significance as the encoder intended given that there is a potential for multiple meanings in any given message (Buttle, 1995).

2.4.3 Marketing Communication and Signals

Signals and symbols are dominant features of marketing communication. Symbols, such as words, objects, actions, and tales, send out signals. Symbols can reinforce changes in organisational structure, operating procedures, and support systems, alluding to the fact that what is happening is real to customers (Herbig & Milewicz, 1994). Symbolic and semiotic communications were reviewed by Duncan and Moriarty (1998) in which the authors defined signalling as communication which prompts or influences some action or interpretation by stakeholders. Signals in marketing, as defined by Herbig and Milewicz (1994), are marketing operations that give insights into the unobservable by providing information beyond their plain form, which can be implemented in a variety of business marketing activities.

Studies have connected communication and signalling when transmitting data (Anand & Shachar, 2007). According to the authors, a common theme in these two branches of research lies in that senders have complete control over what information the recipient perceives regardless of the direct content of the message (communication) or indirect inferred information (signalling). Research into marketing can be interpreted as studies of signs and symbols and particularly how they communicate meaning to customers (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Since consumers are unlikely to be as interested in as many brands as marketers would want, marketers must learn to survive within the confines of current brand relationships (Connors et al., 2021).

Analysing the shared meaning in any signalling is necessary to advance the understanding of branding, corporate reputation and brand image (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Ruekert & Rao, 1994).

2.4.5 Moving to the Modern Day

The approaches reviewed by Buttle (1995) represent thinking about Marketing communications towards the end of the 20th century. A common theme is to see communication as a process which can be described. The recipients, essentially the public, are seen as selectively receiving a marketer's messages but there is no theory that explains what messages the public are more likely to receive and take note of. Neither is there much mention of how the process of communication between marketer and customer evolves. In this century theory has developed to help understand what humans seek to understand especially about something new in the market. One model, the stereotype content model, has received considerable attention and is particularly relevant to the context of an ME. Signalling theory has also evolved to help understand how such a model can be applied in the communication between a business and its market. The stereotype content model (SCM) together with signalling theory has been positioned as a relatively new way of analysing and understanding marketing communications. Traditional models of marketing communications tend to be more descriptive and not predictive, whereas the SCM can be used to predict what signals can be expected from MEs and which might work (Davies et al., 2018). The SCM is discussed in more detail later as this is the main theoretical perspective used in this thesis. First back to the context of the ME and its marketing.

2.5 Marketing and Branding MEs

Studies on the growth and development of MEs shows marketing to be one of their crucial sub-systems. Marketing and long-term planning are most important specific management activities that small businesses are facing (Bruhn et al., 2018). One of the main marketing problems of MEs generally is lack of a promotional strategy and advertising to build a brand name and brand image (Dahlén et al., 2009; Kennedy & Wright, 2016; Sharma et al., 1990). Marketing relies on promoting positive messages, and the circulation of proper information to help convince potential customers to purchase services and products from the business (Williams, 2006). The characteristics of MEs in terms of their market and customers are distinctive: a very narrow range of activities, very limited external contacts, and a very limited customer base (Inan, 2016) creating challenges for marketing.

Like any enterprises, MEs face problems when adopting an effective marketing strategy (Pitt & Kannemeyer, 2000). New products and new ventures can be core attributes of MEs (Zinger et al., 2001), but MEs are more challenged when creating innovative products (Servon, 2006), as fewer people will know and will therefore buy the product and therefore it is difficult for MEs to understand general customer insights (Isohella et al., 2017). MEs should be aware of the value of understanding their customers well and positioning themselves well (Edgcomb, 2002). When an ME's profile is not well known in the marketplace, customers tend to think the business is not good enough (Mishra et al., 1998). MEs should then have a crystal-clear profile of the clients that they want to do business with, and plan and consider the messages and impressions they want to give both in a strategic, long-term way and in a specific actionable way (Williams, 2006). Digital technologies are having a major impact on all business enterprises, and the change to more sophisticated consumer behaviour requires the improvement of corresponding marketing practice (Millman & El-Gohary, 2011).

In recent years, the narrative of devalued trust and reputational crises has extended to all business sectors (Ipsos, 2019). The trustworthiness of a business is increasingly the currency facilitating marketing and advertising – for example, customers are more likely to buy products and services from sources they feel they can rely on (Ipsos, 2019). All companies, including MEs need to develop their own long-term strategies and responsibly deliver their promises to avoid facing a trust crisis or even the end of their business (Servon, 1998; Woolcock, 2001).

The reputation and branding concepts are both important here. 'Reputation' (often used as a synonym for 'brand image') focuses on the consumer processing all received information about a firm, which results in an impression of the firm being formed (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). Building brand image relies on getting positive messages across, the circulation of appropriate information to help convince potential customers to purchase services and products from a business (Pettijohn et al., 1992).

A positive corporate reputation can be crucial to success for an ME as it leads to better purchase intention. Entrepreneurs are then encouraged to convey their personal credibility, professionalism, organizational achievements, and the quality of any stakeholder relationships (Zott, 2007). But ME managers' views can differ as to what reputation means. Lähdesmäki and Siltaoja (2010) summarise various interpretations of business reputation by small businesses' owner-managers. They identify four representative discourses: marketing, stakeholder-orientated, control and social exclusion (referring to negative sense). According to the authors, the marketing discourse posits the business's reputation as a competitive advantage. In the stakeholder view, business reputation emphasis trustworthy relationships with partners and the community. Positive business reputation also serves as a social control restricting business potential negative operation and behaviours. It also points to the possible threats to owner-managers' personal status since they are closely intertwined, especially personifying a business to its owner-manager is seen in negative terms.

Integrated marketing communication places the brand at the heart of marketing communication (Kitchen and Burgmann, 2015) suggesting that MEs should start by considering what they want their brand image to be. But the evidence suggests that ME branding is relatively unexplored as a topic (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Sandbacka, et al., 2013). Only a few studies have touched on the area by for example discussing the role of the owner entrepreneur (Rode & Vallaster, 2005) and the wider context of SME branding (Merrilees, 2007). A knowledge gap then exists around the question of how MEs should manage their branding.

The next section will start by conceptualising both brand and the branding of MEs.

2.6 Defining Brand

The first definition of the term 'brand' was put forward by the American Marketing Association (AMA) in 1960 (Bennett, 1995) and the current definition they endorse is:

> A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.

Another frequently cited definition is:

> *Brand is a* name, term, sign or symbol whose purpose is to identify and differentiate different products *and services* (Keller, Apéria & Georgson, 2008, p. 404).

The Marketing literature has emphasized the relationship between image and the product. Firat et al. (1995) claimed that it is the product image which is marketed, not the product itself. The success of marketing then lies in the representation of an image, as the real and observable product only represents the image and the value imbued in the image (Firat et al., 1995).

There are two key aspects to any brand: tangible features and intangible features. The first includes aspects such as a trademark logo, symbol, and packaging (Keller, 1988). The second aspect may refer more to differentiation and identification. This study talks more about the more perceptual aspects, which includes the brand's image (Kapferer, 1997). A main role of a brand's imagery is to create differentiation and distinctiveness in the marketplace (Gardner & Levy, 1955). Almost every paper that has been written on the topic of branding includes a section relating to brand associations, which emphasize its symbolic value in a consumer's mind (Keller, 2002). The same source defines brand image as:

> *Brand image is the perception of a brand in the minds of persons. The brand image can be considered to be a mirror reflection of the brand personality or product being. It is what people believe about a brand—their thoughts, feelings, expectations.*

The reputation of an organisation has been variously defined but many definitions contain a similar thread of meaning e.g. the perceptions and feelings about an organisation, which is the accumulation of impression held by its stakeholders (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). Chun's review (2005) of definitions similarly proposes reputation to mean:

> *the summary view of the perceptions held by all relevant stakeholders of an organization, that is, what customers, employees, suppliers, managers, creditors, media and communities believe the organization stands for, and the associations they make with it.*

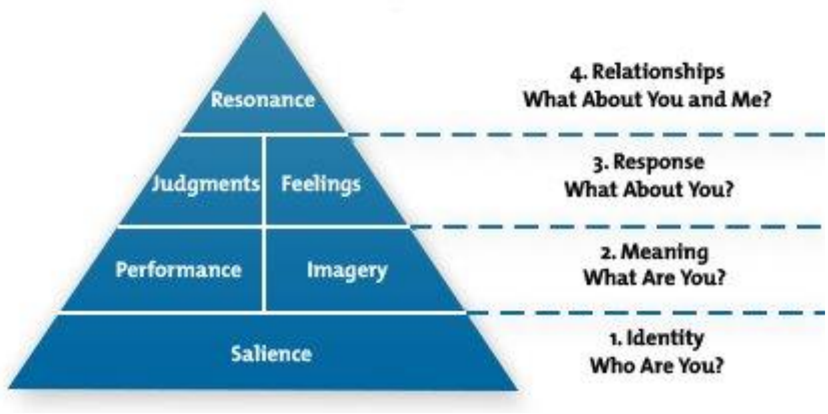
The definition is similar to that of brand image. In this work, and subject to specific differences identified in prior work, the terms brand image and reputation will then be used interchangeably as the brand image of a small business will be similar to, if not identical with, its reputation.

There is an extensive literature on reputation as an umbrella term covering related terms such as “corporate image”, “projected image”, “construed image”, “reputation”, “organizational identity”, and “organizational culture” (Cian & Cervai, 2014). It is an important construct as reputation contributes directly to value creation and firm performance (Geller, 2014). Much of the small business strategic management literature has drawn too heavily from work done on large, established firms (Lumpkin et al., 2010). This also focuses on how the organisation is seen externally (Chun, 2005; Standifird, 2006); but employees can significantly impact on corporate reputation and researchers have analysed how senior management can encourage staff to ‘live the brand’, enhancing the reputation of service organisations during their interactions with consumers (Shaw, et al., 2008).

The first meaningful reference to brand image predates that of reputation and can be found in Gardner and Levy’s article in 1955 where they explained the motivation behind purchasing behaviour. They argued that in addition to their physical nature, products also have a social and psychological role; and also stated that consumers’ feelings, ideas, and attitudes about and towards brands, or their "image" of brands is vital to purchase choice (Gardner & Levy, 1955).

Keller (2002) proposed a pyramid brand model which is also relevant to corporate reputation. It describes brand equity, the value inherent in a brand, as a ‘brand ladder’ with different levels. The components are brand identity, brand meaning, brand response and brand relationship. The most basic level he labels as brand identity, the answer to the question, ‘Who are you?’

Figure 2-1 - Keller's Brand Equity Model



From *Branding and brand equity* by K. L. Keller, B. Weitz and R. Wensley, 2002, London, United Kingdom: SAGE

It is founded on the premise that, simply through market awareness, the owner of a well-known brand name will produce more sales as customers view the goods of well-known brands as better than those of lesser-known brands (Keller, 2002).

Reputation can be construed as a combination of a company's identity and image where identity is regarded as how internal stakeholders perceive it. Many define identity as representing what is central, enduring, and distinctive about the company (Whetten, 2016). Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that how any organisation is seen internally will influence how it is seen externally, linking (internal) identity with the (external) image. This idea may be particularly relevant to smaller businesses where 'who we are' and 'how we are seen' can be expected to be more closely related.

2.7 Personal Branding & Leader Effects

One of the realizations over recent decades is that there are different kinds of brands in many different forms. There are people brands, corporate brands (Keller, 2002), and product and service brand, including country brands (Loo, 2005). In the context of MEs, the personal brand of its owner-manager can dominate that of the firm (Bromley, 2001). MEs are characterized by flatter organizational structures, more informal management styles (if any) and fewer human and financial resources (Shaw et al., 2008). More significantly, in an environment where firm ownership is not divided from control, most owner entrepreneurs are actively involved or even fronting in the service delivery (Schmitt-Rodermund, 2004; Yu et al., 2015).

Consequently, the personality of the owner-manager can be thought of as relevant here, as s/he will literally personify the business to other stakeholders (Muteswa, 2016; Schmitt-Rodermund, 2004). This reflects the literature on the characteristics of the entrepreneur which seem to predict success, and which was reviewed earlier in Section 2.3. Davies and Mian (2010) however show that the leader's image can spill-over onto that of an organisation emphasising the interrelationship between personal and corporate reputation. It can be, therefore, argued that the brand image of an ME is closely linked to the personal branding of the owner (Parmentier et al., 2013). It follows that the literature on personal branding (Goffman, 1978), sometimes referred to as impression management (Goffman, 1978; Lins et al., 2016; Leary & Kowalski, 1990) may be relevant to that of the branding of MEs. Drawing on the definition of personal branding and one provided by Ottovordemgentschenfelde (2017), a personal brand can be defined as:

> *a set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into the differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience.*

Personal branding is often linked to self-promotion within the jobs market and specifically with self-employment (Lair et al., 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013), but many ideas in this line of thinking should be relevant to the marketing of the ME and/or its leader. For example, Schau and Gilly (2003) argue that personal image can be promoted by associating oneself with well-known brands (Labrecque et al., 2011).

While there is considerable literature and research on ME business, as mentioned earlier that on ME marketing and branding is relatively limited (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Merrilees, 2007; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). To contribute to that literature, it would be necessary to identify how brand imagery can be measured. So, here I integrate the wider literature on both branding and reputation to identify the measurement approach used in the research.

2.8 Brand Image Measurement

There are several measurement approaches for brand image (Cian, 2011). In consumer behaviour research, many researchers have utilised the construct of brand personality (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality is regarded as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand, which commonly consist of five dimensions: competence, sincerity, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997). Marketing communication for a product or service can be developed through promoting 'brand personality' where a product needs to be placed in a desirable light of time for consumer, since it calls on that customers' symbolic or soft aspirations (Aaker 1997). According to Keller (1993), although a brand awareness and a positive brand image can help improve the effectiveness of marketing communications, brands with strong attributes or benefit associations require less marketing message reinforcement. Many different brand personality measures have been developed which have implied there are as many as 12 dimensions of the construct, each with multiple measurement items, a large number to consider in any one study (Davies et al., 2018).

Recent literature and empirical data have used social cognition theory to argue how and why humans automatically judge entities with strong humanistic associations, such as a brand, using the same and a more limited number of criteria as for humans (Davies et al., 2018). Both ideas are relevant to how the image of an ME can be researched.

How ‘trustworthy’ a brand/ME is seen for example will influence its success. The idea of a brand being trustworthy evokes ‘the brand as human being’ metaphor and it is through this metaphor that consumers are able to understand the brand (Kapferer, 1997). Brand personality scales, similar in some ways to those measuring human personality, have been produced to help measure brand image (Aaker, 1997). One implication is that brands can be thought of as individuals. A strong brand personality encourages the development of emotional bonds and meaning (Aaker & Fournier, 1995). The definition of brand image cited earlier includes a reference to brand personality, emphasising the close links between the two constructs.

Not that personality either human or brand is the only way of measuring the image or reputation of a small firm. Olmedo-Cifuentes et al. (2014) presented a way of measuring employee views of reputation in small businesses (emphasizing that employees and managers might have different views of what reputation is even in a small firm) which did not involve personification. However, given the prominence of brand personification in the literature explaining the success or otherwise of individual and corporate brands (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013), it was logical to adopt this approach to image measurement but with one further refinement, that of the stereotype content model (SCM).

2.9 Stereotype Content Model (SCM) & Signalling Theory

The SCM argues that we stereotype other groups in society using a limited number of perceptual dimensions. The theory relies upon the concept of stereotyping defined as 'beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Stereotypes can be of two main types, subtle and blatant, with the former being more automatic and unintentional, compared with the latter which are held consciously (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Stereotypes are valuable to people in making sense of their environment, by establishing expectations of certain groups or individuals and by simplifying complex contexts so that the individual can make a judgment about whatever is being stereotyped (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996).

The SCM model (Fiske et al., 2018) proposed that when individuals encounter other people, they need to judge automatically whether they intend them harm or to be helpful, and secondly whether they can enact those intentions (Cuddy et al., 2007; Hack et al., 2013). The first is labelled as a judgment of their 'warmth' the second of their 'competence'. Different groups are judged to be more or less warm and competent. SCM theorists explain this tendency as being evolutionary in nature as in pre-history those humans who either failed to make such judgments or to make them correctly were less likely to survive, so that modern humans are genetically predisposed to make such judgements without understanding why. The same dimensions are recognised in other theory that recognises two similar aspects, how Communal (e.g., ethical, kind, understanding) or Agentic (e.g. competent, effective) others might be (Bakan, 1966; Yang et al., 2019).

While the SCM has been used predominantly to study perceptions of human groups, it has also been used to evaluate the relative imagery of brands, on the basis that brands have humanistic associations (such as personality) (Ivens et al., 2015; Kervyn et al., 2012). Along the same lines, others have examined the relationships between the warmth and competence of a brand and various outcomes (Abele & Hauke, 2019; Kirmani et al., 2017; Bratanova et al., 2015; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Kervyn et al., 2015; Kervyn et al., 2010; Kotzur et al., 2020).

Fournier and Alvarez (2012) argue that other dimensions of imagery relevant to brands might emerge within the same framework in addition to warmth and competence. Partially building on such thinking, Davies et al. (2018) argue that social status should be seen as one such dimension and not as an antecedent to being seen as competent as suggested in the SCM (Fiske 2011; Russell & Fiske, 2008). They justify their point by showing how the need to judge status has an evolutionary explanation and that status makes a contribution to outcomes of brand image, such as satisfaction, which is independent of competence. As warmth, competence (and they argue status) are fundamental to how brands are judged they label them as generic and suggest that all companies should signal status, warmth and competence as brand association factors because potential customers/employees will seek to evaluate them immediately using these dimensions.

For many years, although more marketing communication tools have been used by the majority of marketers, mass media advertising dominated marketing communication in most companies (Lisita et al., 2015). Though the company and the consumer remain the primary marketing communication players, their roles are distinct as consumers have become active participants in marketing communication, engaging in content regarding brand creation that is deemed more trustworthy and has a greater impact on other consumers than content provided by companies (Zailskaite-Jakste & Minelgaite 2021).

Secondly, consumers will probably never care as much as marketers want them to, and so it is vital that marketers aim to succeed within the limits of existing brand connections, many of which are rather remote (Connors et al., 2021). According to Connors et al. (2021), consumers rarely have or desire significant brand relationships, and that such relationships are very rare due to the consumer being relationship-averse or comfortable with the status quo. Smaller firms often fail to recognise that there needs to be coordination in order to communicate effectively and to create a coherent image in target markets using a wide range of marketing communication tools available (Lisita et al., 2015).

What is interesting is the application of stereotyping to marketing communications. According to Neilson and Mittelman (2012), there are communal unconscious perceptions that all humans share, including the use of archetypes, which are primeval images and ideas associated with emotions and symbolism, helpful in understanding the narratives of business . Similarly, Aggarwal and McGill (2012) show consumers rather rely on the idea of automatic behavioural priming, which means they tend to activate a social category generated from brand anthropomorphism, resulting in assimilative conduct that is compatible with the primed category's stereotype. When the archetype creates the pattern, the substance of a myth or story based on it can take on an individualistic form and be delivered in a variety of ways (Neilson & Mittelman, 2012). Also, regardless of the nature of new knowledge, these deeply held stereotyped ideas are extremely accessible, stable, durable, and difficult to change (Connors et al., 2021).

In current marketing communications, brands that have been consistently positioned through time may become stereotyped as being particularly warm and/or competent (Connors et al., 2021). The same point is made by Hess and Melnyk (2016) who hold that consumers judge firms and brands on their warmth and competence dimensions, according to recent research, and that these views influence purchase likelihood. The so called brand stereotype is powerful enough for consumers to ignore information supplied in marketing communications and instead depend on their pre-existing brand beliefs (Connors et al., 2021).

Signalling theory has made prominent contributions to the marketing field. The sometimes subtle signals a firm provides, can be important marketing communication tools for reducing information asymmetry, and are used to promote the marketing values of enterprises including when building consumer trust (Fine et al., 2017; Yim et al., & Kwon, 2019). Firms signal commitment through costly signals designed to communicate underlying qualities or intentions to those who may desire to know such information (Connelly et al., 2011). Central to signalling theory, information asymmetry comprises an information imbalance between a firm and its customers and stakeholders (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 2002; Yim, et al., 2019). The firm is in the position of deciding what information it provides to customers and edicts its communication accordingly. Signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 2002) argues that businesses learn which signals they should give to the market and tactically deal with (Mishra et al., 1998) in branding decisions (Erdem et al., 2006; Spence, 1974). In the context of MEs, we can infer that brand image can be used to signal customers about the ME firm's potential (Brewer, 2007; Mishra et al., 1998). It follows that, if the SCM is correct, that most businesses will signal and/or learn to signal warmth, competence and probably status, but no research could be found where this idea has been formally investigated or tested in general and not within the context of MEs.

In particular the role of status signalling is relatively unclear, (Davies et al., 2018). In a review of current literature on status signals across disciplines and areas (Piazza & Castellucci, 2013), the most commonly used measures are job occupation, education, income and finance (Mandalaywala et al., 2020), which are material and objective socioeconomic status signals (Richins & Fournier, 1991; Zang & Bardo, 2019). Some studies propose high value resource affiliations (i.e. luxury brands, the rich) (Han et al., 2010), quality resource affiliations (i.e. patents, famous professionals and corporations), culture (Kraus et al., 2011) and aesthetic preferences.

There are in addition issues with the application of the SCM to a commercial context. In research into perceptions of human groups, surveys and experiments have been made manipulating dimensions to explore the antecedents of interpersonal level beliefs (Russell & Fiske, 2008). In the original SCM model, the perceived competition of a human group correlates with their perceived warmth (Kervyn et al., 2012), for example, competing groups are seen as less warm than cooperating groups. Status is argued to correlate with perceived competence (Koenig & Eagly, 2014), for instance, high-status groups are seen as more competent than low-status groups.

A study by (Durante & Fiske, 2017) found differences between perceptions of out-groups and in-groups (Hack et al., 2013), and that in group status was rated higher by members than for non-members. Davies et al. (2018) however show that in two databases, one of them of corporate brands, the other of country brands, that warmth, competence and status all correlate with each other, and that status is not a good predictor of competence in these contexts.

Social status has then been argued to predict competence (Fiske et al., 2002); however, the correlation between warmth and status is not reflected in the original SCM because warmth is predicted by perceived competition among social relations rather than ability and control of resources (Fiske et al., 2002, 2007). Some scholars argue there are certain circumstances in which both warmth and competence are positively predicted by group status (Brambilla et al., 2010). However, no research could be found manipulating, for example, the status of a ME or its owner-manager to see whether this promotes perceived competence but not warmth.

2.10 Cross-cultural Studies & Consumer Behaviour

This section reviews relevant literature on cultural differences and how they might influence the decision-making of consumers particularly within the influence of a brand image for status and prestige. Its purpose is to explain my focus on two countries, the UK and China, and to justify why differences in both business and consumer behaviour can be expected between the two countries.

Culture is a fundamental factor determining a person's desires and future actions (Kotler et al., 2020). It provides people with a meaningful context for interacting with, reflecting upon and confronting the outside world (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Culture refers to a set of internal characteristics of individuals, which include their thoughts, preferences, motives, goals, attitudes, beliefs, and abilities, all of which can uniquely define the individual and enable, guide, and constrain his/her behaviour (Kim & Sherman, 2007). According to Choukas-Bradley et al. (2019), the values and traditional norms within a culture influence how people and groups interpret, evaluate and perceive the functional meaning of certain behaviours.

Culture is a contested term and a useful metaphor for culture is an iceberg, split into several layers to distinguish between the visible (above the surface) and the invisible (below the surface) characteristics (Hall, 1976). Another metaphor the "onion diagram" explains culture as made of 3 layers; symbols, heroes and rituals around a core of values (Hofstede 1991). The first three layers are grouped into the category of practice because all three layers can be trained and learned through practices but not the core. The inner core, the value of one thing over another, is characterised by preference and standards (Hofstede, 1991). Although there are other ways of culture modelling such as Schein’s and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s, the concepts of basic assumptions and values that strongly influence decision-making are recognised in all (Schein, 2010; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

Most human behaviour is learnt and so is culture (Kotler et al., 2020, p7). The term 'culture' embodies a multitude of concepts which include a set of learned values and behaviours. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), culture, is made by people interacting, and passed down from generation to generation. As children grow up in society, they learn from their family and other important institutions and acquire basic values, perceptions, desires and behaviours to develop attitudes accepted by others (Kotler et al., 2020).

Culture stems from the social environment, and socialisation where common practices and beliefs are shared with others in a social group. Kotler et al. (2020) argue that each group or society has its own distinguishable experiences that shape them and their attitudes to the world, varying from county to county and from country to country, shaping a common attitude among people within the social group (Sung et al., 2020). As described in the book by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), the social interaction of people encourages common methods of processing information to yield meaningful communication.

Hofstede (1981) describes culture as the collective mental programming that separates members of one group or category of people from those of another. Culture, however, is a relative term and widely spread within a society as there is no such thing as a cultural absolute something which can lead to the stereotyping of all members of a society (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Stereotypes are extreme and exaggerated forms generated when facing significantly different cultures and with their norms, and groups tend to rely on what surprises them and what is helpful to make sense of each other (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1977). The latter authors propose that culture should be regarded as a normal distribution, where people within the same culture do not necessarily all share common sets of artefacts, norms, values and assumptions.

2.10.1 Culture & Marketing Communications

Closely related to institutional change, the culture shift from its pre-industrial to post-industrial level is believed to have had a cumulative impact on marketing communications therefore transforming how individuals, families and organisations behave in current consumer markets (Buttle, 1995). Earlier studies by Leigh and Gabel (1992) supported the idea that in line with social reference groups, consumers are often motivated to purchase products based on the characteristics of the groups they belong to. Marketers are advised to consider that the pressure of cultural, social factors and the expectations of the social groups/institutions can strongly influence consumer behaviour (Kotler et al., 2020; Shukla, 2010).

Commenting on marketing research, Desai (2021, p.84) argues that the consumer is not a self-determining, independent agency making his/her own choices. Instead, consumers are seen as cultural products built and determined largely by the culture they live within. De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Van Den Bergh (2017, p.14), argue that as consumers have grown up in a culture and are used to the values and beliefs of that culture, marketing communications will be responded to differently from culture to culture.

2.10.2 The Dimensions of Culture

Hofstede (1981) proposed four dimensions for understanding cultural differences: individualism/collectivism, power distances, avoidance of high/low uncertainty, and masculinity/femininity. In 1991, Hofstede added fifth dimension - Confucian dynamism which denotes the time orientation of a culture defined as a continuum with long-term and short-term orientation as two poles.

Much research has focused on the individualism/collectivism dimension and as it is relevant to my choice of countries, I will focus first on this. Hofstede defined individualism as a tendency for people to choose for themselves, while collectivism refers to a sense of knowledge within a social group (Hofstede, 1991). Schwartz (1990) challenged this dichotomy but acknowledged the idea that people who live in collectivist (communal) countries prioritise the group over the individuals and where contractual societies emphases cohesiveness among individuals. Nguyen et al. (2014) analysed the individualist-collectivist framework and concluded that marketers and managers will benefit from understanding their customers based on this dimension.

Trompenaars has also dedicated his life to understanding differences between national cultures and presented a 7-dimension classification of culture which is somewhat similar in many ways to that of Hofstede's 5-dimension - universalism (roles and standards) and particularism (fostered relationships); individualism and collectivism (which is very similar to Hofstede's collectivist-individual dimension); neutral and affective which is familiarly known as high versus low context societies below; specific vs. diffuse which refers to the extent to which relationships made at work extend into other areas of social contact; two types of status: achievement-based and ascriptive one; time management regarding either sequential or synchronous views; and go against or with environment (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Whilst the two models, including the dimensions of 'the group and the individual' and 'how we accord status' are similar, some dimensions are not recognised in Hofstede's model.

Hall's (1976, p.105-116) theory based upon high and low-context cultures is a widely adopted method of conceptualising cultural communication. The author categorized cultures into high context and low context cultures to help understand their fundamental differences in communication style and associated cultural issues. In high-context communication, indirect nonverbal messages, which favour metaphors and symbols, are emphasised and the listener is expected to be able to decode the meaning of such information and interpret any deeply embedded meaning. In low-context communication, primary meanings are conveyed verbally or through writing and therefore communication is more direct and straightforward (Hall, 1976).

2.10.3 Culture Differences

Cultures differ due to differences in traditions, religions and histories and individuals in distinct cultures can have various sets of values and preferences, which help them to appreciate differences in the content of marketing communications and persuasion appeals (Aaker, 2000). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) found that cultures can be distinguished by their differences in shared meanings that people expect. This is exemplified in the work undertaken in a cross-country context which includes Western and Eastern countries, regarded as individualist and collectivist groups of countries respectively (Shukla, 2010). As mentioned earlier, researchers argue that the individualism/collectivism dimension is one of the most important in explaining the differences of social behaviour between Eastern and Western cultures (Tsai & Men, 2012).

Eastern cultures are generally consistent with the principles of collectivism, and behaviours which emphasise individual needs are evaluated negatively, whereas Western cultures tend to follow individualism, penalising internalizing behaviours that detract from assertiveness (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). Translating this into consumer-brand relationships, countries with highly individualistic cultures (e.g., European countries) evaluate brand images that associate functional, variety, novelty, and experiential needs more positively than social image strategies. By contrast, cultures with low individualism (e.g., Asian countries) favour social brand image strategies associated with group membership and affiliation benefits over sensory brand image (Roth, 1995).

Similarly, in countries with low power distance (another commonly used dimension of culture) (e.g., Germany, Netherlands, Argentina) where social roles and group affiliation are not highlighted, functional brand images that de-emphasize the social, symbolic, sensory, and experiential benefits of products are most appropriate (Roth, 1995). If the power distance is high (e.g., China, France, Belgium), social and/or sensory needs should be emphasized (Roth, 1995). Shukla (2010) acknowledges that the motivations and perceptions are significantly different between Eastern and Western consumers when purchasing similar brand products. In marketing communications, cultures with high power-distance encourage marketers to use expensive, luxurious symbols and high-status communication appeals namely power and wealth and elitism, but cultures with low power-distance prefer down-to-earth appeals which incorporate humility and egalitarianism (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996).

However, much uncertainty still surrounds the relationship between the psychology of status consumption and the Eastern and Western models of individualist and collectivist cultures (Shukla, 2010). As brand status emerged as an issue in my work, I looked at the issue in a cultural context.

2.11.3 Status as a Cultural Factor – Need for Status

Apart from individualism, power distance, also referred as status differentiation, is found to have a significant impact on the performance of brand image strategies in the context of culture (Roth, 1995). Hofstede and Trompenaars agree on the important role of power and status. Power distance describes how different societies address social status, wealth and power inequalities and hierarchies (Hofstede, 1981). In countries with a high distance of power, power gives satisfaction and powerful people try to keep and even increase their power difference (Hofstede 1981). According to O'Cass and Siahtiri (2014), such a culture is permeated by increasing consumerism, where the symbolic meaning of an object outweighs the object itself, particularly regarding the status symbol of a status object. The culture literature pays particular attention to the influence of status and prestige on consumers' purchasing (Zhang et al., 2010) and conspicuous consumption (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009).

The perception of prestige and status varies by culture (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; Shukla, 2010; Sternquist et al., 2004). Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) argue that the costly symbols of status acquired during conspicuous consumption signal power, wealth and elitism in countries with high power distance values. Status consumption is a way demonstrating social position. Wealthy consumers are particularly likely to be motivated to gain social status by showing their wealth through the consumption of high-status brands with expressive or symbolic characteristics (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014; Shukla, 2010).

Status objects like prestigious brands can symbolise success and achievement and evoke exclusivity (Godey et al., 2013; O'Cass and Siahtiri, 2014). Consumers would associate those brands with high quality and prestige (Hussein & Hassan, 2018), and those who seek this prefer visibly expensive brands to display their wealth and status (Sung et al., 2020).

2.11.4 China and the UK

In this thesis I selected two countries, the UK and China, to locate my work. I did so because they represent two different cultures, types of economy and because I was familiar with both. Testing my thinking in both would also add to the validity of my work.

According to Hofstede's culture index, China and the UK differ substantially across the cultural dimensions of individualism (the UK vs China: 89 vs 20) and power distance (the UK vs China: 35 vs 80). To be specific, Chinese culture is characterized as collectivistic and of high power distance, while British culture is characterized as individualistic and of low power distance. That implies that status differentiation is a cross-cultural difference variable with British being low in status differentiation and Chinese being high in status differentiation.

Over a long period of exposure to globalisation, the UK has developed a mature market centred around branded products. British consumers, therefore, are increasingly aware of brand cues and their symbolic attributes (Shukla, 2010). Following the broad individualistic European cultural scripts, British adolescents are encouraged to assert independence from adult standards (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). Therefore, achievement and success, freedom, and individualism are encouraged (Kotler et al., 2020). In an individualistic culture, one's behaviour is mainly determined by personal goals and individual welfare (Tsai & Men, 2012).

In the context of consumerism, we can infer that British consumers with their individualistic mindset would respond strongly to elements with personalised communication and customised service (Nguyen et al., 2014). Shukla (2010) explains that individualists care about their actual self-concept (how the consumer views him/herself) and as a result, they utilize status products to predominantly achieve social gains and indicate esteem. But in a low-context culture, marketers are encouraged to use rational and functional cues (Tsai & Men, 2012) to attract their more individualistic consumers with appeals of uniqueness, independence, hedonism, and adventure (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019; Ji & McNeal, 2001).

In the Chinese market wealth, status-consciousness and brand-consciousness are growing, and Chinese consumers buy brands to signal their sense of status and appetites for prestige (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014). Godey et al. (2013) found Chinese consumers perceive the image of status (luxury) brands predominantly as prestigious, extravagant and conspicuous objects. This could be because collectivists care about how a consumer thinks others see him/her as a result signalling ostentatious behaviour via status consumption (Shukla, 2010).

The oriental culture is clearly different from Western culture (Hofstede, 1980). Essential to collectivism in Asia and particularly the Chinese culture is the encouragement of interdependence, cooperation, and conformity (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). The role of trust, harmony, duty and face are all crucial to understanding customers (Nguyen et al., 2014; Zhou & Belk, 2004). According to Tasi and Men (2012), Chinese culture is a good illustration of a collectivist and a "we" society, where group goals and collective welfare take precedence over personal achievement. One's identity is predominantly defined by one's role within various social contacts. In the context of consumerism related to status consumption, Chinese consumers are found to be highly status conscious and sensitive to extensive price and reputation comparisons which could be explained by their awareness of face (status), increased self-expression and equality, and that they believe that individual brands differentiate them from others (Nguyen et al., 2014; O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014).

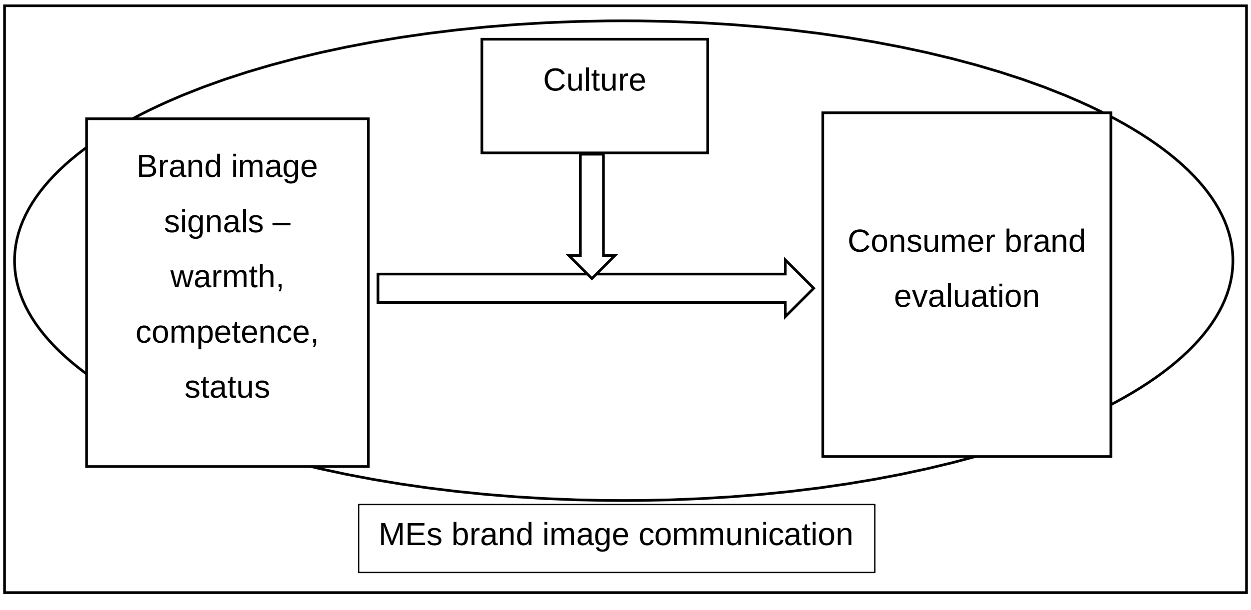
For a high-context culture, marketers are, therefore, advised to create marketing appeals which emphasise the intangible aspects (e.g. image) and subjective features of the product (Tsai & Men, 2012) to Chinese consumers with more features of popularity, collective benefits, and group achievement (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019; Ji & McNeal, 2001).

To conclude, it is noticeable that status signals may have a more explicit influence on Chinese compared to British people. Chinese consumers with a more collectivistic mind tend to accept appeals related to popularity, high social status, luxury and symbolic association and showcase their need for status, while the British with their more individualistic minds may consume status product more for their need for low-key individuality and hedonism (Tsai & Men, 2012).

In summary, any study of microenterprises will be enhanced by considering differences in culture, as we would expect, different reactions to brand image in different countries. As implied by the focus on China and the UK, this thesis will consider MEs in both countries in two studies and consumer attitudes towards ME signalling in the same two countries.

2.11 Conceptual Framework

Figure 2-2 - Conceptual Framework



The above figure summarises much of the relevance of my literature review in the forma of a conceptual framework. My approach is framed by a SCM and signalling perspective (Connelly et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2018; Fiske, 2018). SCM is a critical approach to in the area of social cognition that can be used to make brand evaluations visible in practice (Kervyn et al., 2012). It identifies perceived brand image as socially situated activities within the traditions of both corporate reputation and corporate brand management. It highlights the way in which perceived warmth and competence are inherent in marketing practices. This approach also acknowledges that status will be also be fairly important for particularly competence judgements (Brambilla et al., 2010; Russell & Fiske, 2008). However, another SCM signalling approach advocates that businesses learn to communicate and signal status as status is inherently valued by consumers (Davies et al., 2018). In other words, this approach questions the role of status signalling in brand image communication by asking whether status signalling is independent or if it is linked to either warmth or competence (Davies et al., 2018), Finally there is the question of whether the picture changes in an international context as culture can be expected to moderate the influence of warmth, competence and status signalling (Tsai & Men, 2012)

2.12 Summary

This review finds few prior studies into the marketing of MEs and that such companies tend to be grouped together within the Small to Medium size (SME) category. The concept of branding is rarely considered in the context of a microenterprise.

The review suggests the need to have in place a theoretically-underpinned guideline for owner-managers when promoting and communicating the image of a microenterprise. The main theoretical base chosen for this work is that of the Stereotype Content Model (SCM). It represents a relatively new approach to evaluating marketing communication and one which differs markedly from those adopted historically (Buttle,1995). In addition the idea that firms might learn what best to communicate is taken from signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011). The status (prestigious, respected) of the entity is an issue that could need testing but will also be considered as a dimension of imagery which can be expected to be automatically judged by stakeholders and to influence their attitudes towards an ME directly and not via competence.

From a practical perspective, a crucial issue for the development of image communication in microenterprises is whether the implications from the stereotype content model for businesses include that, as they will be judged/stereotyped for their warmth and competence, they should provide information (via signalling) to ensure such evaluations are favourable. Further if status is independent and not linked to either warmth or competence, then they should also signal status.

To arrive at a deeper understanding of how microenterprises are meeting the challenge of brand image communication, empirical research was undertaken. Specifically, such research first attempts to find out how owner-managers are preparing for marketing and brand communication, what promotional content they use to do so and whether their practice conforms with the theories above. The next section of this thesis will detail the Research Methods used to capture the empirical data, including details on the research strategy adopted, data collection techniques, sample selection and management of the researcher's role. In the first phases the approach can be categorised as resource based (Teece et al.,1997) as it focuses on what MEs are doing. In the final phase a market-based approach is adopted (Porter, 1991) where the effect of specific signals on the customer is considered.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In last chapter major knowledge gap was identified and a conceptual framework was developed to advance our understanding of Micro Enterprise (ME) brand image signalling within the process of marketing and specifically brand image communication. In this chapter, a coherent methodological framework is developed in order to address the research objectives:

1 To identify the characteristics and issues relating to microenterprises in their brand image communication.

2 To evaluate critically models and theories relevant to microenterprises in coping with brand image communication.

3 To explore owner-manager views and real-life practices related to brand image communication in an international context in an international context.

4 To experimentally test the adoption of relevant models and theories.

5 To formulate recommendations for microenterprise branding.

Earlier, reference was made to a knowledge gap in existing research. There is ample evidence on the need for small businesses (particularly microenterprises) to be provided with guidance on how they should signal brand image in practice and that such guidance ought to be based on theoretically informed research. An important contribution of this research work will then be the study and analysis of empirical data on how and what microenterprises and entrepreneurs communicate in their marketing and branding. Objectives 1 and 2 were initially addressed in a review of literature in the fields of microenterprise and branding. Objective 3 concerns the background to the collection and analysis of empirical data and is the focus of this chapter.

Data were collected on key stakeholder views on perceived branding signals and cues to brand image within a real business marketing setting, thus providing the opportunity to explore what a variety of microenterprises consider to be important to their marketing and branding. By comparing theory with practice – i.e. comparing the Literature Review findings with the 'real world' – the researcher will gain a fuller understanding of the issues surrounding the implementation of branding and so be better placed to contribute useful knowledge in relation to branding in the ME environment.

This section –methodology– will provide the rationale behind the overall chosen research paradigm and the methods used in the following chapters. More detail on each methodology, such as sampling, will be introduced in the individual chapters that follow this one.

3.2 Research Paradigm, Ontological and Epistemological Stance

The term 'research methodology' refers to the philosophical structure of theories, philosophies, methods and concepts that are placed together to carry out a research project (Stokes, 2011). Methodology is concerned with the logic of scientific inquiry, in particular with investigating the potentialities and limitations of particular techniques or procedures (Grix, 2002). The term 'research methodology' can be used interchangeably with 'research methods', and 'methodology' itself can be used as a more verbose way of just saying 'method' (Saunders et al., 2015). All such terms refer to the techniques or procedures used to collate and analyse data (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). However, different philosophical assumptions, paradigms and worldviews regulate the choice of methodology and corresponding research design (Saunders et al., 2015), and so the following paragraphs will first discuss the chosen research paradigm.

A research paradigm is regarded as a community-shared, general orientation which is an inherently consistent way of seeing subject matter (Creamer, 2017). This is reflected by sets of interlocking philosophical assumptions: epistemological (defined as those dealing with knowledge on how we assess and measure reality), axiological (about the researcher's role), ontological (the chosen view of the nature of truth/reality), and methodological (for example the choice between quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods) (Creamer, 2017; Lincoln et al., 2011). Central to research paradigm is the key actor of research, the researcher. The role of researcher is summarised by Lam (2003) "In social research there is a long tradition which makes the assumptions that the researcher is separate from the research. The assumption is that what appears or is presented as data and facts, is the unequivocal imprints of 'reality' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). In recent decades this realist view of social research has been criticised by many scholars from different disciplines (Agar, 1987; Gergen & Gergen, 1991; Watson, 2000). First, it has been long debated that the researcher's personal history has a significant impact on social research (Devereaux, 1967). Scholars argue that the researcher cannot be independent from the research because of their cultural background and past experience" (p.84). In other words, a researcher's chosen paradigm influences their design, data collection, analysis, even the conclusions of their research, and it can also influence whether specific topics are considered researchable or not (Creamer, 2017).

As advocated by the so called "paradigm pluralism", which focuses on "diversity and an iterative, cyclical approach to science at all levels of the research enterprise" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010, p.34), this research avoids theoretical controversies around the dichotomy of the distinction between the two main worldviews – positivism and interpretivism (Creamer, 2017). Instead, this research uses a 'toolbox' of methods to answer its research questions. A pragmatic approach, also known as a phenomenally flexible worldview (Morgan, 2007), is therefore adopted in the present research because it emphasizes and encourages the researcher to make use of whatever method works best in addressing the research problems (Biesta, 2010).

From a philosophical and worldview perspective, the chosen pragmatism paradigm values both positivist and interpretivist beliefs (Saunders et al., 2015). In terms of ontological pluralism, the pragmatist recognizes both that there is only one “right” answer and, if methods are good enough, that there can be a construction of something relatively stable that exists “out there”. However, the pragmatist also recognises that multiple answers of understanding reality are out there and as they are constructed by people, these vary in context and change over time (Saunders et al., 2015).

Secondly, in terms of epistemology, pragmatism appreciates both views towards the different nature of the relationship between knower and reality (Creamer, 2017) – objective and subjective (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). On one hand, this improves quality as long as any research bias is under control; on the other hand, the researcher keeps their distance from the participants (Creamer, 2017). Thirdly, in terms of axiology, pragmatism acknowledges the “controversial” issue of a researcher’s beliefs about values in research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010), indeed, pragmatism expects shared beliefs among a community of researchers (Morgan, 2007).

This research then stands for the idea of mixing certain assumptions from both positivist and interpretivist approaches and emphasizes the importance of empirical observations and how researchers interpret these observations in constructing a view on what is being researched (Creamer, 2017). As indicated earlier, pragmatism is about the strategies we use to conduct research and the ultimate goal is answering dynamic research questions (Creamer, 2017). This highlights the importance of adopting multiple research methods aiming to shed new light on the research questions.

3.3 Multiple (Mixed) Data Collection Methods

In light of the limitation of different data collection methods, in recent years multiple data collection methods (mixed method) is increasingly popular (Beck & Prügl, 2018; Harrigan et al., 2012). A mixed methods research (MMR) approach is used for pragmatic purposes in this research because the common features discussed above help set MMR apart from the two conventional research approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). MMR integrates qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis in response to research questions or hypotheses (Creswell & Clark, 2017). To reach a more complete understanding of the research problem for this thesis, the research undertaken studies human and group perceptions and corporate communication as well as using statistical tests of relevant theory. Both inductive and deductive reasoning are adopted when combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The research explores the new insights that emerged from qualitative data and then relates them to the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) and signalling theory, specifically testing whether signalling 'warmth, competence and status' as theoretical bases can explain what is observed in practice.

The methodology utilised adopts the mixed methods philosophy and consists of three interlinked pieces of work. As suggested by Keller (2006), qualitative research is often used to suggest an idea, but to provide greater specificity, it is often accompanied by matching quantitative research. The research then starts with qualitative data collection, where the researcher explores information, then derives findings and then uses those findings to follow up with quantitative tests and experiments.

3.4 Cross Cultural Research

The world is becoming an ever more integrated marketplace and as such practitioners in particular need to be assured that research in one country is valid in others (Adler, 1983). Put another way undertaking research in more than one culture adds to the external validity of any findings (Tsui et al., 2007). This work was undertaken in two countries with somewhat different cultures, the UK and China. The choice of countries was partly driven by expedience in that the author is studying in the UK but is of Chinese nationality. However, one advantage of the choice is that the two countries differ in their business cultures, as indicated by the Hofstede measure of culture (Hofstede, 2020), suggesting that any common findings might be generalised more readily than if the research had been in the one culture alone. In Chapter 2 literature was cited that suggests particularly status judgments may have a cultural dimension when the UK and China are compared. One downside of cross-cultural research is the need to ensure that key concepts and words can be translated without significant changes in meaning. More details on how the author aimed to meet the challenges of researching in two countries is provided in the individual chapters that follow this one.

3.5 Phases of the Research Study

The research project was carried out in two stages, the first two studies were more exploratory in nature and the last more confirmatory. First a series of personal interviews with the owner-managers of MEs in both the UK and China were conducted. Then a content analysis was made of key parts of the websites of MEs again in both countries followed by an assessment of the relevance of the SCM (Fiske et al., 2007) as revised and applied to brand imagery (Davies et al, 2018). The final study involves a quantitative experiment (conducting an experiment through administration of questionnaires) again in both countries.

Existing theory would suggest that MEs would signal their warmth, competence and status to their markets (Davies et al, 2018). In Phase I, interviews with ME owners were content analysed to compare what owner-managers said about their marketing communication with what the theory suggests they would focus upon. The approach was qualitative and can then offer a means of accessing actual brand associations by developing a relationship of closeness and trust with participants (Chandler & Owen, 2020). However, in any such research there is the potential for bias, for example owner-managers may wish to provide what they consider to be socially acceptable responses, particularly when being interviewed by an academic researcher (Goldas, 2017).

To complement the work in Phase I, in Phase II, the content of parts of ME websites labelled 'Who we are' or similar was analysed with the same objective. As suggested by Keller (2006), a more quantitative portrait of the brand identity is deemed desirable, as it enables more confident and defensible strategic and tactical recommendations. Also, here the benefits of two-way communication are forfeited but potentially the data gathered is more objective as it contains the considered communication of MEs. Signalling theory also argues that firms learn which signals are the most effective in their communication (Connelly et al., 2011).

The findings from Phases I and II, in brief summary, were that the content of ME marketing and brand communication is compatible with a focus on all three components that were expected from theory (warmth, competence and status) as in both studies there was strong evidence of signals compatible with each of the three components. The data from these studies were also analysed by comparing the frequency of mentions between the three groups and across cultures. These findings and prior work guided the approach adopted in Phase III where the status signalling of a (fictitious) ME was manipulated in an online experiment to explore their effect. The proposed relationships between the Dependent Variable (e.g., purchase intention) and Independent Variables (e.g., status and country competence) are argued from the literature (e.g., Davies et al., 2018; Fiske, 2007) and from the data gathered beforehand. Thus, the quantitative part tends to quantify an observable significance through the use of statistical tools to test hypothesised relationships. The advantages of an experimental design include control over what is being tested and statistically testable findings (Kirk, 2012).

Triangulation is achieved in this research through four aspects. Firstly, more than one methodological approach is used to meet the research objectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012; Heale & Forbes, 2013). One main reason for using the three phases is to obtain a more comprehensive picture, which enables initial, exploratory and qualitative research to enlighten the next more quantitative section and better understand how theory and practice work in ME branding. Secondly, according to Saunders et al. (2015), this research benefits by corroborating research findings through using three independent sources of data as well as data collection sources (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Thirdly, investigator triangulation is considered when different researchers independently compare the results for Phases I and II (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Fourthly, triangulation using theory is applied through taking social perception theories from social psychology and using them to explain a ME's communication phenomenon in marketing (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

3.6 Pilot Study and Exploratory Study

Pilot studies are fairly common in social research and were used here for all three studies (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). The term refers to small scale versions of larger studies as well as to the pre-testing of larger scale work including questionnaires (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Researchers use pilot studies for a number of reasons including trying to get a better understanding of the research topic (Allen, 2017). Allen (2017) explains that this can be useful when the research area has not yet been previously investigated. Pilot studies are also used to test are search approach and to eliminate any errors or potential misunderstandings. Seen in this way a pilot study is a preliminary or test study (Allen, 2017). Pilot studies can be used when using any type of method setting, but especially when trying to collect data in a new way or just to reduce the chances of any problems before full implementation (Given, 2008).

This study was carried out using mixed methods, and so the nature of the pilots varied. For the first two studies the aim was to test the approach being used and to give the researcher experience in interviewing (Collins, 2003). For study 3 the piloting was more extensive as it involved identifying suitable stimuli for use in an experimental design. Critics have argued that conducting a pilot can lead to the contamination of sample, that is, participants (respondents) who have already been exposed to the pilot may have different reactions than those who have not (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). This research used different samples for different research phases to avoid this potential limitation.

Exploratory research is a methodological approach that focuses on discovery and theory generation or construction. It is particularly useful when the research area is relatively new and underexplored and can help the researcher identify topics and issues often using a qualitative approach which can be investigated in later and often more quantitative research. Exploratory research in the social sciences suggests the ideas of exploration and of the researcher as an explorer. In this context, exploration could be considered a point of view (Jupp, 2006). According to The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods the term "exploratory research" or "exploration" refers to a wide-ranging, systematic data collection aimed at maximizing the discovery of generalizations based on a description and direct understanding of a social or psychological phenomenon.

The research design chosen for studies I and II is an exploratory research approach. It is argued that the typical purpose of conducting exploratory research is to obtain ideas and insights (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2006). Exploratory study can reduce the probability of an inadequate, incorrect, or misleading set of research objectives and act as vital first step to a more rigorous, conclusive, confirmatory research (Zikmund & Babin, 2015). Further, exploratory or qualitative research can be used to identify variables that should be included in the research and to generate research hypotheses (Malhotra & Malhotra, 2012). Here the researcher identified issues with status as a marketing signal in particularly Study 2 which was tested in Study 3. However, the findings of both exploratory studies were often useful in their own right as they confirmed the idea that MEs use all three types of signals that theory suggests they should.

3.7 Secondary Research

Secondary research is defined as the analysis of data originally collected and analysed for another purpose (Heaton, 1998). Secondary research entails finding gaps in and running with or against the literature to understand what is currently known about the topic at hand and to assess the quality of the material available (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). Therefore, secondary data are the historical data that is collected and recorded from published or compiled sources to support a research study (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). According to Hox and Boeije (2005), using data collected earlier by other researchers or for other purposes than research is possible for some social research questions. With the encouragement of secondary research which sharpens problem formulation and leads to better-informed decisions, creative and pragmatic researchers tend to utilise secondary research and gather and analyse existing data whenever possible (Lesch & Hazeltine, 1990). Also in marketing research, conducting secondary research usually involves lower costs for access, assistance with the design of research methodology, and providing industry information (Kolb, 2012).

Secondary data are valuable for cross-cultural comparisons in terms of the breadth of research (Allen, 2017). This thesis aims to address of how MEs communicate their brand image in practice in an international context. I chose to do secondary research for Study II as it allowed me to investigate new research questions regarding ME brand image communication, corroborate or extend the original analyses of Study I (to certain extent triangulating or verifying the analyses of Study I), and also compare with other secondary data sources in an international context (Curtis & Curtis, 2011; Given, 2008).

The secondary data played a substantial role in the exploratory phase of the research in defining a specific research problem and seeking a solution. However, the challenges of the secondary source have also been acknowledged for methodological quality assurance (Allen, 2017; Given, 2008; Hox & Boeije, 2005). To help minimise the disadvantages associated with secondary data, care was taken first to gather information from a known sample base. by using the online official business information databases such as and FAME in the UK and TYC for China Doing so ensured relevant MEs and their Web sites were retrieved and as the secondary data is adequate to draw conclusions. Further, the secondary data gathered in Study 2 could be compared with the primary data gathered in Study 1.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics is about the appropriateness of the behaviour of researchers and involves the rights of the research subject or people who are affected by it (Saunders et al., 2015). Two crucial ethical considerations regarding safety and well-being concerns of participant and responsibility of the researcher were assured complying with four principles listed below (from Bell et al., 2018).

1. Participants and their interests including affiliations or potential conflicts should be declared and managed.
2. Informed consent including rights of participants and interests of researchers should be assured and interpreted flexibly.
3. The records and documents of the research finding requires the protection of confidentiality and anonymity.
4. Ethics in the conduct of research and governance regimes should be thoroughly assured.

No children were included in any sample to ensure the research fell within the University's code on ethics in research. Ethical related issues when researching human subjects were formally considered for study I-interview fieldwork- as well as for the online questionnaires used in study III. After the filter questions and pre-screening, respondents were informed they were participating a survey, in which their answers would be treated anonymously and confidentially. No data were obtained which could identify any respondent. They were also told there were no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. Ethical approval was obtained under the University of Chester policy on research ethics.

3.9. Summary

In summary, this chapter aimed to explain and justify the methodological paradigm used in this thesis – a pragmatic mixed method research approach. Three separate but related studies are used. The first is highly qualitative and relies on the interpretation of the researcher for its contribution. The second is similarly an analysis of what MEs appear to be aiming to communicate about themselves but is more quantitative in nature. The findings of the first two studies, as largely exploratory, were used to inform the design and objectives for the final study. The final study uses an experimental design and is by its very nature quantitative. Many of the research findings imply a positivistic orientation, in that statistics are used to suggest their generalisability. The considerations concerning general ethical issues were also provided in this chapter. The next chapter – Study I Qualitative interviews – initially places the study design within the context of ME communication, and then discusses and analyses the results of the individual interviews.

Chapter 4 Study I - Interviews with ME Owner-managers

4.1 Introduction

This first phase of methodology serves to meet research objective 3, (To explore owner-manager views and real-life practices related to brand image communication in an international context) and investigates how MEs in real life believe they communicate their brand image to their market. Insights and perspectives were collected from 14 owner-managers and where possible by examining their websites. The chapter will provide details of the research design used, together with the means of collecting data for analysis, including sample selection, and the analysis approach that was adopted.

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 The Approach

The use of the qualitative case study is a well-established approach in the business literature (Farquhar, 2012) and the first methodology draws upon this tradition The qualitative-interpretive paradigm can help the researcher understand a little-known subject area (Shaw, 1999), such as here with ME brand image communication. There are few accounts of corporate branding for small businesses that could be identified in the literature (Juntunen et al., 2010; Sandbacka et al., 2013), and fewer still into how specifically MEs communicate their brand image to markets (see Chapter 3), indeed the phenomenon - brand management is "often seen as an oxymoron" within a small business and entrepreneurial society (Merrilees, 2007, p. 403). Also, many ME owner-managers and entrepreneurs do not appear aware their enterprises can be thought of as "brands" (Kennedy & Wright, 2016). As a result, a qualitative methodology was seen as an appropriate starting point, providing subjective but rich human experience on the matter (Saunders et al., 2015).

The approach allowed me to discuss with real-life entrepreneurs, which helps bring a research context alive (Bell et al., 2018; Yin, 2017). In this phase, multiple cases are used as I wished to follow a comparative approach which depends on having a number of different cases. These can capture the complexity of brand image communication (Stake, 1995), and enable in-depth insights into how MEs communicate in their everyday management.

4.2.2 Interviews

In-depth interview was used as the main method. Where possible I also read through any material available on-line to help me prepare for the interviews. Personal interview is one of the most widely used procedures in social research for collecting primary data and in-depth information about peoples' attitudes and values (Saunders et al., 2015). The main aim of interviewing is to acquire first-hand information on the subject, here of brand image communication for MEs, particularly a conceptualization of any underlying patterns in their communication and promotion.

The interviews conducted here were semi-structured to both encourage owner-managers to express themselves, allowing them the flexibility to air their own agenda but, at the same time, to help the interviewer focus the exchange within a specific ambit of discussion (Bell et al., 2018). Also, the interviewer could follow up ideas, expand on motives, and sense feelings more effectively (Bell et al., 2018). As an example, the interview questions needed to lead to the main objective of this phase, which was to investigate whether and how the brand associations of warmth, competence and status are considered and applied within ME communication as predicted by SCM and signalling theory.

To ensure that critical problems were addressed without losing focus, an interview guide (Figure 4.0) was created (Bell et al., 2018). A list of topics and sample questions on marketing communication and on brand signals were developed based on the literature. Well-established interview protocols were followed, and questions ranged initially from the general (i.e. context and company profile) to later particular inquiries (i.e. brand image communication with specific signals) (Bell et al., 2018). Some topics were addressed using different questions which depended upon the context and the responses from interviewees.

All interviews were recorded, with the permission of the respondent, and later transcribed. A memo log was also used to record for example any gestures which might have been used to emphasise specific points (Bell et al., 2018).

Figure 4-1 - Interview Guide

Context/ME profile

• Can I ask you something about your business that we will talk about? How is the business organised? How would you describe the culture?

• How long has the business been going? Did the people who started the business have any previous experience? Or is this the first business you have had?

• What is the nature of the business? Where are the revenues coming from? Who are your customers?

Brand image communication (Elliott & Boshoff, 2008; Sandbacka et al., 2013)

• Why you do think they became your clients? How did they decide? Please talk me through how what happened.

• What impression do you try to give particularly to potential customers about yourself and your business?

Brand awareness and image measurement (Davies et al., 2018; Fiske, 2016)

• I would like to ask you something related to perceived -

• • Warmth -friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, and trustworthiness,

• • Competence -intelligence, skill, and efficacy

• • Status – workplace location, prestigious education and outstanding degree, luxury brand consumption, reputation in the market

Other optional questions (with flexibility)

• Which would you think is the most important in your customers' decision-making, whether they thought you were competent or whether they thought they could trust you guys? Can you say a bit more about that?

• What do you think your interactions would be like? What kinds of expectations or concerns might you have about how you would get along with or be seen by your interaction partner?

Pilot interviews were conducted in advance to gain confidence about the structure and delivery of the semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al., 2015). An experienced British researcher as well as a Chinese ME founder were invited to a quiet venue; their reactions and feedbacks responding to those initial questions were recorded and later transcribed and analysed, thus helping revise the language and ensure the specificity of the interview questions. Some problematic questions (i.e., confusing questions) were detected and/or modified.

4.2.3 Sample and Data Processing

A research population is defined as the entire aggregation of cases that meet a specific set of criteria and it is the eligibility criteria that determine the attributes that will make a target population acceptable for interviews or for investigation (Saunders et al., 2015). The population for this research is the owner-managers of the smallest business cohort i.e. those with less than 10 employees. A nonprobability sampling (judgemental sampling) approach was used (Saunders et al., 2015). Owner-managers were identified and approached because they had some contact with the researcher's University, or one of its employees, to facilitate the initial introduction. The researcher approached each owner-manager in advance to gain their approval and to ensure informed consent. All were interviewed face to face, but some interviews were done over the internet.

Owner-managers can be regarded as key informants as they should be knowledgeable about their image communication in practice (Kumar et al., 1993; Seidler, 1974; Guest et al., 2006). The image of an ME can also be regarded as an expression of the personal values and identity of its owner (Juntunen et al., 2010). The sample size was influenced by the idea of data saturation, that is when little new information was forthcoming the interviewing was stopped (Guest et al., 2006).

In total, four females and 11 males were interviewed, their businesses ranging across different industrial sectors. The main topic was how they communicated their image to their markets and interviews typically lasted around 30 minutes as they were quite focussed. Care was taken to interview participants who were engaged in their existing business market promotion and communication. The characteristics of the sample demonstrate the diversity of the participants interviewed (see Table 4.1 below). 4 had no employees, 9 were based in the UK mainly in the North West of England, 5 were in the South West of China (Guiyang and Chongqing) Some were involved in business to business markets, others in business to consumer markets. Most were in the services sector although two were involved in manufacturing.

Table 4-1 - Interview Participant Details

No.	Location	Position	ME Description	No. employee	Duration
1	UK	Head teacher	Fine Art Training institution	0	00:33
2	UK	CEO	Business research consultant	8	00:46
3	UK	Owner manager	Marketing consultancy	0	00:22
4	UK	Owner	Education agent	3	00:52
5	UK	CEO	Presenter and media training	0	00:20
6	UK	Owner manager	Executive search	2	00:22
7	UK	Owner manager	Food manufacture	4	00:55
8	UK	Owner manager	IT consultancy	3	00:18
9	UK	Owner manager	Video production activities	6	00:31
10	CN	Co-owner	Convenience store	0	00:25
11	CN	Principle	Young children cram school	4	00:20
12	CN	Co-owner	Young children cram school	4	00:19
13	CN	Owner manager	Financial services	8	00:20
14	CN	CEO	Food manufacture and retail	7	00:25

Triangulation was used to assess the validity of interviews, for example by inspecting the websites of businesses where they existed, and in one case by interviewing a customer. However, the content analysis of owner-manager interviews provided the main data for analysis. It was analysed by the author and his analysis was checked in discussion with a supervisor.

To aid the analysis, QSR's NVivo 12 software was applied to all the transcribed interviews. The transcripts were read and relevant pieces such as words, sentences and sections relating to how MEs communicate were labelled and coded. The imperative coding process involved the identification of actions, activities, concepts, opinions and other relevant content of brand communication. Certain codes were repeated in several places and/or explicitly emphasized by interview participants, and content reflecting brand image associations were also coded. The most salient codes were then identified, and many codes combined and grouped together in the forms of categories (themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These categories were labelled, and decisions made in terms of their apparent relationships using the SCM as extended by Davies et al. (2018) i.e., under the themes of warmth, competence and status.

Prior studies have noted the importance of corporate identity and culture, as well as marketing and external corporate communications, as being important determining factors or cornerstones of corporate image (De Pelsmacker et al., 2017).

Through the interviews from the 14 MEs, the codes for warmth, competence and social status using the words or their synonyms, related sentences and descriptions from measures of brand personality (Davies et al. 2018) were used to identify and code data relevant to these three themes expected from SCM and signalling theory.

4.3 Findings and Analysis

The findings are presented using evidence from the interview transcripts, with interpretation supported by extant literature. These interviews were first content analysed using predominantly thematic analysis to reveal the underlying patterns from interview responses, and then the frequency of the main thematic codes was counted. From the account of the respondents, notions of competence, warm and status were repeatedly emphasised in the conversation. This finding helps to support the conceptual framework that developed. The codings are then categorised into three groups: competence, warmth and status. In summary the frequency of codings for the three groupings were:

1) Quality, professional, experience (69 references); labelled as Competence
2) Good nature, support and generosity (59 references); labelled as Warmth
3) Prestige symbols and success (31 references) labelled as Status

Table 4-2- Summary of the cases with codes and sub-codes

Name	Files	References
Quality, proficiency, experience	11	69
Quality service	5	9
Being competitive	3	4
Being skilful	2	2
Competence of owners	2	2
Being convenience	1	1
Good nature, support and generosity	11	59
Good intention to customers	8	18
Retaining customer relationship	5	11
Being honest	2	4
Selling service rather than product item	1	2
Being trustworthy	1	1
Prestige symbols and success	7	31
Upmarket	3	11
Qualification	4	10
Group affiliation	4	8
Awards winning	1	1
Premium price	1	1

Table 4-3 - Crosstab query for each interviewed MEs

No.	Good nature, support and generosity	Prestige symbols and success	Quality, proficiency, experience	Total
1	4	0	4	8
2	1	2	5	8
3	11	0	2	13
4	3	5	9	17
5	1	11	4	16
6	3	3	8	14
7	12	5	12	29
8	15	4	11	30
9	2	0	2	4
10	2	0	4	6
11	4	1	7	12
Total	58	31	68	157

As shown in Table 4.3, I found that while the entrepreneurs as a group do signal status, not all of them do so. 4 MEs did not provide examples of signalling status but all provided examples of warmth and competence signalling. Further analysis was then carried out by revisiting the data.

4.3.1 Good Nature, Support and Generosity (Warmth)

Examples from the transcripts with the codes in bold are shown below. When asked about how they communicated with customers, warmth related themes emerged by both British and Chinese respondents as follows:

"I give my customer the impression that I am a ***very kind person****."* (Chinese interviewee No.10, convenience store)

"I firstly approached to students' parents and students by visiting their place, and tried to understand what their current levels are, and what areas they will need for support to get better grades. And my team and I were school teachers in the business in the start-up stage, and we tried to give our targeted parents and students the impression of ***approachable*** *people, we can get along well and take good care with students, and we are college graduates, also we are capable to teach students to help them get better grades and results."* (Chinese interviewee No.11, young children cramming school)

"I am very ***friendly,*** *and I am* ***supportive****. I think some of my students have* ***become friends*** *[and some] just maintained* ***good relationships****."* (British interviewee No.1, fine art training institution)

"I think it's about the ***relationships****. It is because of the relationships that we build with customers, you know people buy from people who they like and trust you know experience. I want to help and make a difference and if we place a really inspirational leader somebody that can really change that business, and* ***make the lives*** *of the people that work in that business* ***better****, and then you know it's really rewarding and actually you know it's a lot fun, when you're working with clients on that basis, so I guess the impression we want to give is that we're not just in it to make fees and make money cause genuinely, we've got a nice life style, we're not we're not greedy and we're not like a lot of our competitors are very focused on an exit plan, we want to sell the business within five years or we have got investors, that they need to keep happy and it's all about the bottom line and pressure to grow the business, where is that's never been it for us, we're small family business and we want to we want to help clients."* (British interviewee No.6, executive search)

"As a small business what you're trying to do is to still keep the ***friendly nature*** *of it so that you do keep a relationship with the customer, you know, they don't feel as though* they're *dealing with a small business."* (British interviewee No.7, food manufacture)

*“**Approachable**. I want to reassure them that we're not just gonna win the work and then they won't see you'll hear from me again, do you know, what I mean and it's just like an account manager take, it's not about that* it's them *we've got a great talent and people that help me film and help me edit and stuff but I I'll be there in the background overseeing and making sure everything's going well whatever the scalar project whoever it's for whether it's a big client or a small client.”* (British interviewee No.9, video production activities)

*“We have a number of core values, one is be **kind** and **generous**, so be kind is and generous might sound a bit fluffy, but be kind is to be open to things, being generous is always exceeding the ask of our client, so whatever they ask we try and exceed, we're trying to always be generous because in my experience that's where referrals and a positive relationship is built, relationship based business to our brand personality is quite humanistic, okay so like being **generous**, and you're only as good as your last project, so we're results driven, people pay us to tell them about their customers to grow their brand so we make their staff happier, if we don't deliver the results on the bottom line and make more money on market share whatever it is we won’t get the next the next commission we won't build that **relationship**.”* (British interviewee No.2, business research consultant)

The respondents from both UK and China repeatedly referred to themselves as being “approachable” and by being “friendly”, “kind” and “supportive”. It is possible to infer that they perceive this “approachable” quality as a positive one that the respondents were pleased to share this with the researcher. The key reasons, according to the respondents, is that they are “building relationship” with the customers. Respondents from both UK and China recognised the importance of positive relationships with the customers and its importance to the longer-term development of the firm’s performance. Respondents from both countries repeatedly refer to themselves as “small business” and the importance of relationships, demonstrating that respondents are aware of their weakness (smallness) and the key to tackle it (relationship). Applying this to the SCM model, typical indicators of warmth from within this model are “trustworthy, friendly, honest, likeable and sincere, social ability and morality” (Fiske, 2016). The above quotes, especially the items highlighted, can be interpreted as signals of good intentions and a positive customer relationship. By conveying these warmth signals, MEs are more likely to be able to promote positive customer emotion and further establish a trusting relationship (Fiske, 2016). Perceived warmth can be expected to be more relevant for a small business compared to a large corporate (Yang & Aggarwal, 2019). The fact that both the UK and Chinese respondents talked about their warmth in similar way implies that there is a shared understanding about the value of signalling “warmth” in brand image communication.

Though respondents from both countries appeared to recognise the importance of warmth to build up relationship with the customers, there are differences in terms of how to develop relationship with the customers. UK respondents talked about developing business relationship with individual customers while Chinese respondents talked about developing relationship with the customers’ families. The literature consistently suggests that in a Chinese context, the family is considered as part of the business unit (eg. Lam, 2011, Redding 1989), it is therefore unsurprising that when developing business relationships, the family members of the target customer are often included in the process.

4.3.2 Quality, Proficiency and Experience (Competence)

When talking about how to communicate with customers about their brand image, respondents repeatedly talked about the quality of product/service, staff proficiency, skills and experience.

> *“As a **professional** UnionPay POS service organization, our company assists UnionPay in managing the acquiring business of member banks in Guiyang, and works with banks to create a harmonious, safe and **efficient** bank card acceptance environment.”* (Chinese interviewee No. 13, financial services)

> *“The establishment our institution has always been based on the philosophy of ‘attentive service and high-quality teaching’; we actively explore the potential of students. With both **strength** and **quality**, we allow children to have a life that is enriched by arts. The school has **excellent** teachers, mainly with **professional** teaching training experience in art, dance, vocal music, piano, etc. The teachers are all art **graduates** from formally recognised colleges, and all teachers have obtained teacher **qualification** certificates and professional qualification certificates, and their academic qualifications are up to **high standard**. The school is equipped with relevant teaching management system and assessment rules, and professional teachers take regular training to ensure the teaching **quality**, professional **skills** and authoritative aspects of our centre.”* (Chinese interviewee No.12, young children cramming school)

> *“We are **capable** to teach students to help them get better grades and results. There were other competitors in the industry we competed with, we have built good reputation and word of mouth among students and parents by training our teachers*

and leverage up our curriculum design and internal management.” (Chinese interviewee No. 11, young children art school)

‘It is of ***convenience****, and the feeling of comfortable drove by the good* ***quality*** *of service. They can buy what they need in shortest walking distance. My service is* ***better than other*** *shops, I don’t simply sell stuff, but provide service, I offer delivery of goods to their door if they want.’’* (Chinese interviewee No.10, convenience store)

“I do everything. I have a round of ***skills****, I do have something I have, having been a teacher as well I have a wide range of understanding of skills. I am trying to give an impression like an* ***expert****, an expert in my field. I think the image of me, and my business are the same so something that's again it's* ***professional****.”* (British interviewee No.1, fine art training institution)

“I would say the ***knowledge*** *and the* ***expertise*** *are invaluable as experienced by my clients and I want my client feels like a different person, giving them amazing feedback and a whole bunch of tools, and inspire and motivate them to put it all into action.”* (British interviewee No. 5, presenter and media training)

“We really wanted to make people flick believe that we're a ***professional*** *business so we've gone for quite conservative and branding, and chosen those I feel look and a feel that give people confidence that there's some real experience in the business, so we just felt it had a real sort of feeling of heritage and people would trust it.”* (British interviewee No. 6, executive search)

*“If*if *it's not* ***high-quality*** *as a small business, then you can't command a high premium and if you can't command a high premium, going no business because your volume is small the only people who can command a small premium are the ones with very large volume and as a small business you can't do that.”* (British interviewee No. 7, food manufacture)

“We're very ***specialists*** *in what we do so we specialize 100% in Microsoft technology whereas our competitors don't specialize generally and they masters of everything so a lot of our customers come to us because we are specialists in the area.”* (British interviewee No. 8, IT consultancy)

“There's good things we use an ***experienced*** *team because it'll save you time further down the line. I'm hopefully we're positioned that we're* ***professional****, big enough experienced enough but not outrageously creative or gonna be really expensive like they might go if they search in London or Manchester, we're some more down to earth but* ***pragmatic.****”* (British interviewee No. 9, video production activities)

“I've already done something which earns me lots of trust I would say it is ***personal effectiveness*** *or* ***competence*** *and I'm good at all I'm doing and that has been understood but my way of thinking or managing my businesses.”* (British interviewee No.4, education agent)

Competence indicators were found in the interviews with all participants, which are defined in the literature as being within the scope of “intelligent, skilled, and efficient, as well as assertive and confident; noting the mix of items related to capability and agency” (Fiske, 2016). Competence related codings were the most frequently noted in the current work.

Entrepreneurial competence is central elements for business success (Schmitt-Rodermund, 2004). A recent study emphasizes that all sizes of business are expected to be perceived as competent in their markets (Yang & Aggarwal, 2019) but that smaller businesses might be seen as less competent but more warm than larger ones. From the accounts of the respondents, it is clear that respondents from both UK and China recognise the importance of competence when talking about brand image communications. Respondents repeated referred to their specialised skills, expertise and experience and its relation to customers’ respect and trust in the business relationship. Despite being micro enterprise, there was no evidence that the respondents saw themselves as lesser in terms of their knowledge, skills and experience, i.e., competence, nor do they express that competence is of less (or more) importance than other key elements. To justify their competence, many ME respondents refer to membership or accreditation of professional bodies, which can be related to another key element – status.

4.3.3 Prestige symbols and Success (Status)

Status signals were less explicitly signalled by MEs during the conversations with owner-mangers, and some MEs did not mention any status related signals. As a group status signalling appeared less prominent compared to signals of warmth and competence. Chinese MEs appeared did not talk about status signals except for the two quotations extracted below when how they communicate their brand image with customers, some respondents mentioned social status related signals: quality by association with a professional body and being upmarket:

*“As a **member** of the local banking **association**, our company has obtained the ISO9001 service **quality certification** and has a good **reputation and trust in the industry**.”* (Chinese interviewee No.13, financial services)

*“We keep promoting our brand's corporate positioning as pragmatic, rational, and wise, standing at the **high end of the industry**, doing more technical, more valuable, and more future orientated. We want to become one of the **most popular top** table food brands for our customers.”* (Chinese interviewee No.11, food manufacture and retail)

British MEs provided more status signals relatively speaking in their image communication. Among the status signals were quality, collaboration with large enterprises, premium market, success and educational qualification, “class” was a distinct term referred to by the UK MEs.

*“There's a lot of people who are nearing retirement, tend to be around that age or some I don't so let's say the 50s in the 50s, 60s, **middle-class**, because it **cost** is quite as **high** so you need a reason to pay it. So, I'd say that children mostly coming from middle-class family, they have sent several that go to private school. Like a **boarding school**, not a state school… I market my business and myself as a **quality to attract high quality businesses**, where you will learn, directly more to **high end to the market**.”* (British interviewee No.1, fine art institution)

*“Our brand has a **classic** feel to it in English, it feels it feels like a classy name. We chose from those something that looks again looks quite classic, we wanted the label came up with the gold flashes on the label, which also I think just that that sort of gold **metallized** those strips do make it look quite smart and we wanted we wanted it to look to again it's a **classy** feel to it…well I think that our demographic the people most likely to pick this up, are looking for some they're looking they quite like the idea that there is something **premium** that they can spend their money on you know they're looking for something interesting and perhaps **different than their friends**.”* (British interviewee No.7, food manufacture)

*“We work with **larger organizations** like **Gore**, **Sony** Music, the **Food Standards Agency** and then we work with lots of other sort of smaller organizations that are perhaps 200 users. We also have **accreditations** from professional associations, so we're qualified in what we do and obviously this helps when clients make the decision.”* (British interviewee No.8, IT consultancy)

*We've got say the **British Army**, the **National Trust**, we did a film for the **Olympics** once, **major multinational** manufacturing companies, so we punch above our weight with some of the names that we have that we make films for.”* (British interviewee No.9, video production)

*“We are the **UK's leading** experts in content creation and presenter training and coaching for clients of all levels of experience. Each presenter is **expertly branded** and **marketed for success** and goes on our Talent Database that is accessible to*

TV Companies and Agents." (British interviewee No.5, presenter and media training)

*"We are bound by a research code of conduct case of this professional **accreditation** so that's our input that's our **quality mark**, I have a **PhD** in their field, a PhD is a badge to say that you can research academically to that level."* (British interviewee No.2, business research consultant)

Status items, include the likes of 'sophisticated, prestigious, up-market, chic and prestige' (Aaker, 1997; Davies et al., 2018), and according to the SCM predict perceived competence (Fiske, 2016). Quality can be also regarded as status signal (Piazza & Castellucci, 2013). Holding and possessing the symbols of social status indicates higher social ranking, therefore influencing how MEs should be treated (Han et al., 2010). Again, not all participants claimed to signal status in their image communication, particularly for Chinese participants, but it is unknown whether status signals were communicated implicitly in other ways or unconsciously associated with competence as implied by the SCM given that the sample size is limited and not balanced in each culture in this exploratory study.

In summary, the interviews with the MEs help to identify some key themes that are of interest to the researcher. Though there are some differences between respondents from China and the UK, the majority of the respondents' discourse show consistency when talking about communicating signals to ME customers. Respondents talked about being "friendly", "supportive" and "approachable" when developing business relationship, indicating signalling the notion of "warmth" to customers. Furthermore, respondents repeatedly emphasise the importance of quality, expertise, knowledge and skills when communicating with their customers, demonstrating their emphasis on the notion of "competence" in the marketing communication process. Finally, some respondents referred to factors such as social class, accreditation and membership of professional bodies when communicating to their customers, demonstrating that the notion of "status" does indeed play a role in the ME's marketing signalling with their customers.

4.3.4 Other Findings

Some other important themes emerged alongside the analysis of codings relevant to SCM theory:

(1) The relationship between the branding of ME business and the personal brand of the owner-manager or other employees.

Particularly during the early stages of the growth of an ME, brand identity and image can be similar to the identity of the owner-manager, as s / he is the company's most active promoter (Juntunen et al., 2010). When the ME grows and expands, the enterprise and the image of the owner can become separated (Juntunen et al., 2010). A halo effect may also explain the dominance of the personal brand equity of the ME owner-manager. The theory, put forward by Thorndike (1920), argues that people tend to infer attributes about other people either from unrelated traits or behaviours, or from a global evaluation (Thorndike, 1920 In the context of the ME certain salient traits of ME owners may influence the assessment of their business. Ratings of specific attributes can be influenced by the overall impression of an individual (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). For example, if the owner-manager is seen as trustworthy so might their business. Finally, the literature emphasises that all employees irrespective of the business size can influence the company image, by 'living the brand' (Shaw et al., 2008).

Two quotes illustrate the general issue of employees being associated with brand image:

> *"It just was small* ***doesn't necessarily it's me****, that's my colleague yeah this is probably two of the* ***team members*** *that are pushing the brand and I'm not part of that conversation.*'' The owner-manager of the research company (it has nine employees) responding to questions about the ME brand (Interviewee No.2).
>
> *"It is based on me so* ***it's me****, everything is based because it's just me so really I sell it yeah from myself."* The owner of the art school (a one-person business) responding to ME brand question (Interviewee No.1).

(2) Mismatch of brand evaluation: inconsistencies between owner-manager, customer, and website content

In one instance the researcher was able to interview a customer of the business. His views contrasted with those of the business owner:

> *"She emphasizes competence when she talks about her work, she emphasizes that she'll teach you techniques and she doesn't talk about warmth, she doesn't talk about herself as a likeable person and the comments that she puts on the website from the students, [she] tends to be about the competence which can be a bit strange because when you go to the classes there's someone unstructured, so unlike a normal class where that seems to be a bit of a contradiction it's only when you realize how much you're learning that you respect her competence, but it's immediately obvious that she's a warm person and she smiles all the time, never gets annoyed or angry."* (from a customer of the interviewee No.1)

Comparing the two perspectives from both the owner-manager (Interviewee No. 1) and its customer, there is a clear mismatch regarding whether competence or warmth is the more important for the business. The researcher also visited the company website and its social media. It turned out that while the business owner emphasized competence, most of her customers tend to complement the owner-manager's perceived warmth more.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has discussed and justified the approach that was adopted. The main aim of the empirical work was to explore the relevance of existing theory (Fiske, 2016; Kervyn et al., 2012; Davies et al, 2018) on what all organisations can be expected to signal from theory with what they actually aim to communicate. The content analysis results of interviews with 14 owner-managers confirmed that MEs do aim to communicate warmth and particularly competence as expected from the SCM (Fiske, 2016) and its adaptation to the context of branding (Kervyn et al., 2012). All three of the dimensions/themes that might be expected from the SCM as further adapted by Davies et al. (2018) to include status/prestige could be illustrated by examples from the interviews. Chinese MEs appeared less likely to signal status, comparing to UK MEs in this study. However, respondents in total were less forthcoming on examples of using or recognising status issues compared with warmth or competence. One issue that emerged is whether what owner-managers claim they do is reflected in what they actually do. The second study then takes a slightly different approach to exploring what MEs communicate when marketing themselves.

Chapter 5 Study II – ME Website Content Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to give an account of how the researcher carried out the second phase of the research – the website content analysis of three groups of MEs. This desk research builds upon the first phase in the previous chapter, where I aimed to test the entrepreneurs' views about how they communicate their brand image using their self-report and personal interview to address objective 3. This second study further explores and checks the presence of certain brand image signals (warmth, competence and status) but within the website content of a different and larger sample, in other words it examines what MEs do in promoting themselves, rather than what their owner-managers say they do. The findings are presented in both a a quantitative and qualitative manner. The third objective is relevant again but so is the second: To evaluate critically models and theories relevant to microenterprises in coping with brand image communication somewhat more than in Study 1. In total 1243 individually coded signals of either warmth, competence of status were identified from the relevant parts of the websites of 66 MEs located in either the UK or China.

This study collected and analysed text-based content from the websites specifically the section labelled 'Who we are' or similar. This was followed by chi-squared group comparisons of the data to compare how the content varied between three sub-groups, one group randomly selected from a British database, a matched sample from China and a similar sized group who had entered a competition in the UK, where doing well would result in increased status. As before the analysis focused on signals of warmth, competence and status. The data collection and analysis were facilitated through the use of Nvivo 12.

5.2 Research Design

As mentioned earlier, and following Chun and Davies (2001), the content of ME websites was seen as particularly relevant to understanding of how they wish to be seen as a company and this was coded and analysed.

5.2.1 Deductive Approach

The methodological approach adopted for this phase is predominantly deductive. From the first phase (Chapter 4), that MEs recognise the idea of communicating warmth, competence, and status in brand image communication is known, but what is not known is whether they actually do so. However, it was established that the key words and phrases which express the meanings of warmth, competence and status, can guide the researcher's understanding including when reading the website pages of MEs. The purpose for this analysis was to both examine the literal manifest (words and phrases which are visible and obvious in meaning in the text) but also any "hidden" latent content (content implying a deeper meaning in the text) indicated by the context.

Secondly, the outcome data can provide a more quantifiable analysis, one which triangulates the findings from the first phase. The coding process used, in terms of technology, was as before manual, rather than using an automatic computerized coding approach. This facilitates any interpretation of the content and avoids any mistakes due to any words having multiple meanings. For example, 'warm' can mean friendly in one context but high temperature in another. Only by manual analysis can any consequent errors be avoided.

5.2.2 Data Sources

The sample of websites analysed are 66 in total. These include 22 ME companies who had entered a competition entitled the High Sheriffs Awards for Enterprise (HSAE), designed to promote business excellence in the Cheshire area (http://cheshirehsae.co.uk/the-awards/) of the UK (a purposive sampling of MEs who are willing to promote their brand image). Secondly, 22 MEs were randomly selected from a marketing database called Financial Analysis Made Easy (FAME, 2020) representing a more nationally representative sample of UK ME's. The final sample is of 22 MEs selected from a Chinese professional database called Tianyancha (TYC for short, https://www.tianyancha.com/) which were chosen to be similar to that of the UK FAME sample.

When searching the FAME database, the inclusion criteria were the number of employees (ranging from 0 to 9) and those with website information. A second screening process was to exclude websites which did not have an “About Us” or similar positioning content. For the FAME database sample, the researcher initially went through 60 ME websites which met the search criteria but only 22 of them included the data being sought.

For the Chinese TYC database, paid access was obtained. Their search engine only included the filter “micro and small business” but the researcher managed to check criteria which could indicate “number of employees” from the number of registered employees for Chinese national insurance in the individual search result pages (TYC, 2021). Finally, after screening over 200 candidates, excluding websites which were unavailable or not accessible), 30 MEs were shortlisted but only 22 met the criteria for inclusion as some of their websites did not have enough content for a business profile.

The author endeavoured to match the types of companies included in the FAME and TYC samples by type of business as much as was possible given the constraints of the available data. The main activities of the MEs in each sample are given below. The samples were also chosen to ensure a reasonable geographical coverage.

The figures below demonstrate the geo-codes crated by ArcGIS Online (www.arcgis.com), a geographic information system software, the locations of the MEs were distributed across in the UK and China respectively. In the first geographic map, the green plots stand for HSAE data whereas the blue ones are for the FAME data.

Figure 5-1 - Map with the geo-plots of the MEs data in the UK

Figure 5-2 - Map with the geo-plots of the Chinese MEs data

Table 5-1 - List of Cheshire HSAE MEs' and profiles

Description	Turnover	No. Employees
Executive Search	£155k	2
Catering and hospitality staffing agency	£500k	1
Development/implementation of software for manufacturing	£280k	4
Specialists in mature hedging and topiary	£100k	2
Business networking events	£80k	2
Consultancy - English in Education	£200k	4
Online butchers	£250k	3
Healthcare product development, manufacturing and product licencing	£3m	2
Distillery	£380k	3
Media publishing business magazine and website	£1.3m	4
Coworking space, training venue	n/a	2
Manufacture of tonic syrup and tonic water	£100k	4
HR, OD and L&D consultancy	£100k	1
Training for safety and performance of critical industries	£650k	4
IT Consultancy	£400k	3
An innovative approach to marketing in a digital world	£8k	1
Mental health and well-being	n/a	2
Education	£80k	1
Pet retail and online subscription service	£130k	2
Beauty training academy	n/a	1
Design and manufacture of MicronFog TM systems for dust suppression	£320k	3
IT Consultancy	£200k	3

Table 5-2 - the 22 MEs from TYC, China

Industrial sector	Count of industrial sector
Administrative and support service activities	4
Information and communication	8
Professional, Scientific and Technical	3
Wholesale and Retail Trade	7

Table 5-3 - the 22 MEs from FAME database, UK

Industrial sector	Count of industrial sector
Administrative and support service activities	7
Construction	4
Information and communication	3
Professional, scientific and technical activities	2
Wholesale and Retail Trade	1

Tables 5.1 to 5.3 provide information about the companies studied. In summary, the samples from the two databases represent a range of business types and geographical areas. While they cannot be argued to represent all such businesses in either country, if the analyses provide similar pictures this adds to the generalisability of any conclusions.

5.2.3 Data Analytical Process

NVivo, a Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International was used to analyse the sections of the company websites labelled 'Who we are' or similar i.e., the part of the website where the company is talking about itself, its 'projected identity' or how it would like to be seen. NVivo has many advantages and may significantly improve the quality of qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2015). The software was used first to manage the 'coding' procedures. The analysis approach was to explore the relationship between categories and themes of data, seeking to increase the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Bell et al., 2019).

The approach of analysing data using coding units was adopted. This turns qualitative data into quantitative data which can then be analysed (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The researcher firstly examined meanings of the content for the development of theory. One of the advantages of examining the underlying meaning of text lies in the comprehensive understanding of brand signals within the context that this can provide. Doing the analysis by hand means the researcher can include phrases as well as words and can see the meaning of words and phrases in context. The individual codes were then matched to the theorised concepts: warmth, competence and status (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5-3 - Example Screenshot of the Coding Tree from HSAE

Nodes for the Research Questions

Name	Files	References
Competence	21	138
Competent	21	112
Confidence	7	13
Capability	3	3
Efficient	1	1
Intelligent	1	1
Warmth	18	90
Warmth Items	17	69
Charitable Behaviour & Social Impact	7	12
Supportiveness	6	9
Status	16	87
Status Items	15	51
Prestige	9	20
Education	6	16

The part of the website chosen for analysis could be very large in terms of the word count, so the categorising of data into meaningful units is important. This involved first identifying and counting the number of times a particular word occurred. Words or phrases that could be interpreted as warm, competent or status related were first identified. When key words, terms, and phrases concepts appeared, the researcher highlighted them, and then directly connected them to a specific development code. Nvivo helped save the locations and counted how many times the codes were mentioned. Once this coding process was complete, thematic analysis was used to identify and match the themes of the three categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes could sometimes be developed into further categories until they ended up aggregating to warmth, competence and status respectively. Statistical analyses of the quantified codes were used to respond to the research questions with the help of the Chi square method.

5.3 Findings

5.3.1 Frequency, Themes and Quotes of Brand Signals

Here a similar picture emerged as in Study 1 i.e., with competence descriptors being the most frequent followed by warmth and then status items but from a much larger sample of items: the total number of competence related items coded was 688, warmth related items 327 and finally status related items 228 (Table 5.4).

The SCM suggests that warmth is the primary dimension for social perception (Fiske et al., 2002; (Cuddy et al., 2013), but the empirical investigation found competence to be dominant in ME image communication. This could be explained by Kirmani et al. (2017) who claimed that choosing different service providers and having different task-related goals can influence the evaluation of brand positioning and personality, that is, competence may dominate warmth. Another possible explanation is that (as explained in the previous chapter) small companies sense that they might be stereotyped as lacking competence as prior work suggests (Yang & Aggarwal, 2019) and seek to compensate by emphasising their competence in their marketing communications.

Table 5-4 - Proportion of Codes of the UK and China

Codes/ Group	TYC, China	FAME, UK	HSAE, UK	Total
Warmth	112	125	90	327
Competence	293	257	138	688
Status	68	73	87	228

5.3.1.1 Codes and Quotes of Warmth Signals

The main themes coded for warmth signals are listed below. They were similar to the findings in the previous phase:

(1) Good intention
(2) Supportiveness
(3) Social and charitable behaviours
(4) Customer care

Specific examples in this category are as follows with coded words or phrases in bold (quotations are anonymised):

> "*Harry, Steven and the rest of the team at XXX are passionate about creating a **welcoming**, **relaxing** and **comfortable** environment for their guests to come into.*" (from a hairdressing salon store, FAME).

> "*Our ability to **support** our clients with objective, holistic advice around cross-sector recruitment means they **benefit** from insights into the talent picture across a whole range of sectors and not just their own*." (from an executive search and head-hunter company, HSAE).

> "*We want to **give back to our community**, and particularly strive to support projects however we can, which we believe will **benefit UK pets and wildlife**."* (from a pet shop, HSAE).

> "*According to the needs of customers, **meet their wishes, think what customers want**, and **worry what customers worry**, XXX will work hard to "become the most trusted health management service platform in China."* (from a health and medical consultant agency company, TYC, China).

5.3.1.2 Codes and Quotes of Competence Signals

Again, the findings were similar to those in first phase. Examples of coded items for competence signals are given below, after the 4 main themes found within Competence:

(1) Quality service/product
(2) Experience of years
(3) Proficiency and efficiency
(4) Confidence

Examples:

> *"Our passion for precision involves creating impressive, immediate landscapes* ***where quality is the benchmark****. Whether it's hedges, topiary or irrigation, we can help you plan your ideal outside space today."* (from a landscape company, HSAE).

> "*J brings almost* ***18 years of experience*** *working as a software expert in the industrial automation industry including industrial process control, MES, robotics and real-time inspection systems*." (from a technology consultant company, HSAE).

> "*She is tremendously encouraging with a great sense of humour but* ***totally professional****. I have recommended her to everyone in the stroke carers group to which I belong*." (from a medical practice provider, FAME).

> "***We firmly believe that*** *in today's fierce market competition, only* ***professional skills*** *and good service can survive. So, we have been on the front line of beauty service business for a long time. Staff with good service awareness and* ***work experience****. Our service will definitely bring you a great return*." (from a cosmetics beauty company, TYC, China).

5.3.1.3 Codes and Quotes of Status Signals

Signalling status was more explicit and more frequent than in the first phase, although status was still ranked last in terms of overall frequency. Among the status signals found, a commonly used theme was that of education/qualification. Qualification has been used in signalling theory as an example of how to signal competence (Spence, 1978). Here however many owner-managers also mentioned the name of their university as well as their degree, which the author interpreted as using the latter's reputation and status to define their own. It can also be an efficient signal of investment in education (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Spence, 2002).

The main themes within the status category were coded and categorised as follows:

(1) Qualifications of both education degree and professional training;
(2) Group affiliations with high status entities (i.e. famous universities, corporates, individuals);
(3) Awards, accreditations;
(4) Prestigious job occupations.

Some examples:

> "*A joins XXX having completed his **PhD** in Chemical Engineering at the **University of Cambridge**. As Product Developer, A plays a critical role in delivering XXX's ambitious R&D program*." (from a technology consultant company, HSAE).

> "*I'm a **CIPD Chartered Fellow**, a Fellow of the **Learning and Performance Institute**, a **qualified** coach and member of the **Association for Coaching**, a Personal Trainer **accredited** by the REP*." (from a human resource company, FAME).

"*Our company mainly provides services for staff training, human resource recruitment and* ***headhunting*** *for* ***international brand hotels****, domestic* ***high-star hotels****,* ***large restaurant chains*** *and* ***large and medium-sized travel companies***." (from a human resource company, TYC, China).

"*We pride ourselves on providing an excellent, personal and friendly service to all our clients and to offering the* ***finest range of serviced Luxury London Apartments*** *and* ***5**** *London Boutique Hotels*." (from an accommodation company, FAME)

5.3.2 Associations between Country, Groups and Signals

Several chi-square tests were conducted to test for differences among the signalling between Chinese and British MEs' and between the two UK groups. A significance level was selected of .05 for all calculations. (Saunders et al., 2015). The contingency tables below provide the following additional information: the observed cell totals, (the expected cell totals) and [the chi-square statistic for each cell].

5.3.2.1 Associations between country and signals

As mentioned in Chapter 2, data were obtained from two countries, the UK and China, two countries with quite different cultures, to help provide more confidence in any findings. The overall data suggest that MEs use competence signals the most and status signals the least frequently. But it is not known whether this varies by country.

I then tested whether country has any influence on signal usage:

A 2 x 3 contingency table was set up (see below Table 5.5) to compare the signalling frequency of TYC (China) and FAME from the UK using the chi-square calculation.

Table 5-5 - The 2 x 3 Contingency Table – Country & Signal

	Warmth	Competence	Status	Row Totals
TYC, China	112 (120.80) [0.64]	293 (280.33) [0.57]	68 (71.87) [0.21]	473
FAME, UK	125 (116.20) [0.67]	257 (269.67) [0.59]	73 (69.13) [0.22]	455
Column Totals	237	550	141	928 (Grand Total)

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between country and the signals. The relation between these variables was **not** significant, X^2 (2, N = 44) = 2.89, p = .235.

5.3.2.2 Association between UK Groups

Following the same method procedures, I tested whether there is any difference between groups in the UK (FAME & HSAE), that is, whether groups entering a competition where status might be gained from doing well vary their brand signals.

Table 5-6 – The 2 x 3 Contingency Table – UK group & Signal

	Warmth	Competence	Status	Row Totals
FAME	125 (127.05) [0.03]	257 (233.41) [2.38]	73 (94.55) [4.91]	455
HSAE	90 (87.95) [0.05]	138 (161.59) [3.44]	87 (65.45) [7.09]	315
Column Totals	215	395	160	770 (Grand Total)

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between UK group and the signals. The relation between these variables was significant, X^2 (2, N = 44) = 17.91, p = .000129 (i.e., p<.05).

There is a difference between the signalling of the two groups of UK companies. One explanation difference is that the HSAE group had entered a competition which, particularly if they did well, would give them good publicity and status. I then explored the data to try to understand why there were these differences.

The frequency of warmth signals for the FAME group is 27% and for the HSAE is similar at 29%. The percentage of the frequency of competence signals for the FAME group (56%) is somewhat greater than for the HSAE group (44%) and the percentage figure for status signals for the FAME group (16%) is much lower than for the HSAE group (28%). I then tested to see if these differences were significant.

The results of chi-square tests are reported below:

Table 5-7 - The 2 x 2 Contingency Table – Warmth in the UK datasets

	FAME	HSAE	Marginal Row Totals
Warmth	125 (127.05) [0.03]	90 (87.95) [0.05]	215
Non-warmth	330 (327.95) [0.01]	225 (227.05) [0.02]	555
Marginal Column Totals	455	315	770 (Grand Total)

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between warmth signals and UK dataset (Table 5.7). The relation between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 44) = 0.112, p = .738.

Table 5-8 - The 2 x 2 Contingency Table – Competence in the UK datasets

	FAME	HSAE	Marginal Row Totals
Competence	257 (233.41) [2.38]	138 (161.59) [3.44]	395
Non-competence	198 (221.59) [2.51]	177 (153.41) [3.63]	375
Marginal Column Totals	455	315	770 (Grand Total)

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between competence signals and UK dataset (Table 5.8). The relation between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, N = 44) = 11.97, p = .000541 (p<.05). The higher frequency in the FAME dataset for competence is statistically significant.

Table 5-9 - The 2 x 2 Contingency Table – Status in the UK datasets

	FAME	HSAE	Marginal Row Totals
Status	73 (94.55) [4.91]	87 (65.45) [7.09]	160
Non-status	382 (360.45) [1.29]	228 (249.55) [1.86]	610
Marginal Column Totals	455	315	770 (Grand Total)

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between status signals and UK dataset (see Table 5.9). The relation between these variables was highly significant, X^2 (1, N = 44) = 15.15, p = .0001 (p<.05). The lower frequency of signalling in the FAME data for status is statistically significant. The explanation of the overall difference between FAME and HSAE groups is that the latter emphasise status more and competence less than the former. This can be explained by the motives of companies entering the HSAE competition. To win brings prestige (companies can use the High Sheriff's crest in their websites for example) and it is then no surprise to see such companies emphasising prestige/status more than might be expected from the FAME sample which is likely to be more representative of all MEs in the UK.

However, the four samples shared a similar profile in terms of frequency of use of signal type. In each case signals representing warmth, competence and status were apparent, but in each case competence signals were the most frequently used and status signalling the least used, even among the HSAE group.

5.4 Validity and Reliability

The analytical coding process was qualitative which is by default subjective. Internal validity was assured as the protocol of coding and classification was validated and agreed with a research supervisor.

5.5 Limitations

The researcher only analysed the 'who we are' section and only the text i.e., I did not analyse/include any pictures or symbols. The sampling of companies depended upon their having a website and one which contained a section about the company. There is no guarantee that the FAME and TYC samples are fully matched or that if the sample had been much larger that significant differences might have emerged.

Ensuring the accuracy of understanding of language and culture norms used when translating Chinese website material into English was challenging. However, the researcher familiarised himself with codes and themes in Chinese published works in the area (application of SCM theory to branding). He also took advice from a British-Chinese senior researcher in Small Business Marketing and Entrepreneurship when coding Chinese website data and making translations.

As mentioned, although the researcher’s judgement and understanding of brand signals’ usage could be subjective and biased but the second eyes of the intercoder was in place when a senior researcher helped validate coding and the classification process, who analysed the same texts using the same categorizing scheme and also reached the same decisions.

5.6 Summary

This chapter has further explored the research questions of how MEs communicate their image through signalling warmth, competence and status. Reverting to objective (1) To identify the characteristics and issues relating to microenterprises in their brand image communication. a clear picture is emerging of MEs using all three of the theoretically grounded dimensions of brand image in their self-promotion, as would be expected from a combination of signalling (Connolly et al., 2011) and SCM theory (Fiske, 2016; Kervyn et al., 2012; Davies et al, 2018). This helps meet the second objective of evaluating models and theories relevant to microenterprises in coping with brand image communication. Competence emerged both times as the most emphasized which as mentioned previously might surprise and SCM theory argues that warmth is the more effective of the two aspects of social cognition (Fiske et al., 2016).

Status signalling is clearly used as confirmed in all datasets, especially MEs with higher promotion intentions signal their status more purposively. The most frequent status signals used by MEs are educational attainments/qualifications (Kraus et al., 2011; Mattan, Kubota, & Cloutier, 2017), some signal status through quality (Piazza & Castellucci, 2013), as well as wealthy resource affiliations/luxury conspicuousness (Han et al., 2010). This suggests that status might be important in its own right as argued by Davies et al., 2018, but there is no statistical evidence to prove this.

I did not find differences due to country of operation and signalling as implied by the literature on culture (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014; Godey et al. 2013; Shukla, 2010); however, this may benefit from further examination among customers and with a focus on status given the literature discussed in a previous chapter on the differences in how status is perceived between the UK and China.

Studies I and II together meet the third objective: To explore owner-manager views and real-life practices related to brand image communication. An important point to emerge is that most MEs do signal status, but not all of them. 17 MEs (9 from FAME, 6 from HSAE and 2 from TYC, China) did not signal status. This appear to contradict with the literature which suggest that status perceptions are used by observers to help them judge competence (Fiske et al., 2002) while others argue that status signalling makes its own contribution to how brands are perceived (Davies et al., 2018). This has lead the author to further explore the notion of status aiming to shed some light on the importance of status (or not) in the process of communicating with ME customers.

The final piece of work, the third phase, will use an experimental design where the status of a fictitious ME will be manipulated (using signals identified in this and the previous chapter) to test whether this changes the perceived competence and/or warmth of the company and in turn purchase.

Chapter 6 Study III –Experimental Design

6.1 Introduction

After conducting the first phase of exploring how MEs communicate brand image by signalling warmth, competence and status, in the second phase I aimed to further confirm MEs as signalling these dimensions. Differences were found in Study II between the signalling emphasis of two groups on competence and status. However, the HSAE sample were probably more likely to signal status. Overall status signalling was less frequently used in both Studies I and II than the other two dimensions. Some MEs chose not to signal status. This raises the question as to why some MEs might choose to signal status more than others and why some chose not to signal it at all. Building upon Studies I & II, the current study will experimentally test the effect of signalling status for an ME and possible explanations for any findings. In doing so it will also test the theory that such signalling influences perceived competence when influencing outcomes. This chapter aims to describe the method chosen and report the results from this phase.

There are four main sections for the chapter. In the first part, the relevant research objectives will be restated to set the scene. A number of hypotheses will be proposed to be tested in the empirical work that follows. The first section reviews previously used methods in studying the consequences of signalling brand image associations on consumer responses and perceptions. Reasons will be given as to why a quantitative experiment was used. The second part will describe the detailed research design for the experiment. The characteristics of the sample (subjects) and their recruitment will be provided. The materials used in the experiments (measurements of the survey) and its procedures will be presented. The third part will discuss and explain findings, ending up with some implications and limitations as the final part of the chapter.

6.1.1 Revisiting the Research Objectives

The research objectives (ROs) are:

1. To identify the characteristics and issues relating to microenterprises in their brand image communication.

2. To evaluate critically models and theories relevant to microenterprises in coping with brand image communication.

3. To explore owner-manager views and real-life practices related to brand image communication in an international context.

4. To experimentally test the adoption of relevant models and theories.

5. To formulate recommendations for microenterprise branding.

The first three ROs were investigated by studies I and II and I established that MEs communicate their brand image through signalling warmth, competence and status as theory suggests they should. However, both studies suggested that they tend to emphasise their competence for business promotion purposes and focus less explicitly on status signals.

The fourth and fifth ROs remain to be addressed. To examine and test relevant theories with ME branding, there is a need to determine the cause-effect relationships between signalling and consumer behaviour. Difference in status can shift the purpose of human interactions when signalling warmth and competence (Swencionis & Fiske, 2016). Mainstream SCM researchers claim that perceived status predicts competence (Fiske et al., 2002, 2007; Russell & Fiske, 2008). But some find that status also predicts warmth traits (Brambilla et al., 2010). Views are also mixed on whether status signalling is always beneficial. In research among humans, Garcia et al (2019) to find that signalling status can be off putting to potential friends. Davies et al. (2018) imply that a reputation for prestige/status is beneficial for companies and, furthermore, that this aspect of imagery makes a contribution to desirable outcomes such as satisfaction which is independent of either warmth or competence.

The earlier literature review considered several related areas of literature. From these it is evident that scholars note a lack of research into the marketing and branding of MEs (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Sandbacka et al., 2013) where an ME is defined as a business with less than 10 employees and with a turnover of less than €2 million. One issue is that ME owners can differ in what they understand to be the reputation of their business (Lähdesmäki & Siltaoja 2010). While there is a substantial literature on the marketing of SMEs (Merrilees, 2007), SMEs can be relatively large organisations with significant resources and MEs lack both human and capital resources. There is a substantial literature on the personality and traits of entrepreneurs (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2002; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Lam & Harker 2015). However, this literature has focussed on the relationship between the owner's attributes and the creation and success of a new venture, rather than on how the venture gets to be successful.

Two areas of literature from within that on marketing were considered. The literature on marketing communication up until the end of the last century is well summarised in Buttle (1995). In essence the focus was on describing the communication process rather than on identifying what to communicate. This literature developed in part into that labelled integrated marketing communication in this century where one message emerged that communication to customers should be integrated around what the company wanted its brand to represent (see Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). This idea links nicely into the literature on brand imagery. Prominent within that is the idea of brand personality (Aaker 1997) which acted as both a model of how brand imagery might be seen and a way of measuring it. One problem with the brand personality literature is the growing number of dimensions that academics have identified (Davies et al., 2018) making it difficult to know which to focus on in any one context, a particular challenge for the ME owner-manager who might lack both the time and expertise to consider the issue. One potential answer to this problem is the Stereotype Content Model derived originally in the context of human-to-human interaction (Fiske et al., 2018) but extended to human to brand interaction by authors including Jennifer Aaker (who published the original brand personality scale). The SCM argues that entities with humanistic associations (such as brands) will be automatically judged for their perceived warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2018) and, some have argued, their prestige/status (Davies et al., 2018). This suggests a more manageable number of image dimensions that both researchers and managers should focus on, but the literature applying the SCM to brands is relatively new and has not been applied to MEs. The role of status is also relatively controversial (see Fiske et al., 2018 and Davies et al., 2018).

If the SCM as extended to brands is correct and all brands are evaluated for their warmth, competence and status, signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) can be used to argue that managers will learn that these are useful signals and will use them. Theory would then predict that all companies, including MEs, would and should signal the warmth, competence and status of their brands as customers will be looking for information on each to make their evaluations. However, would owner-mangers recognise such thinking? Put simply, the main aim of this thesis can be translated as the research question: do MEs signal warmth, competence and status to their markets and if not, why not? Studies 1 and 2 suggest that while MEs signal all three dimensions, they signal status less frequently and some not at all.

The main objective of this research is, therefore, to fill the knowledge gap created by a lack of prior work on the marketing of MEs by exploring how MEs operate their branding and marketing communication, and specifically to evaluate and explain their use of brand associations for warmth, competence and status. This chapter considers the issue of why MEs are less likely to signal status.

How signals are interpreted by potential customers can also be expected to vary between cultures (De Pelsmacker, et al.,2017, p14). The review of the culture literature identified a potential issue with status as the cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1991) appears to be responsible for differences in how people react to brands which market status (Roth, 1995). As MEs are valuable in any culture, it was considered important to include more than one cultural context in this research and the author's choice of the UK and China was explained and justified. There is some work testing the generalisability of the SCM between and across cultures (Bergsieker et al., 2012) and across different demographic groups, including gender (Eckes, 1994), between immigrants and ex-pats (Lee & Fiske, 2006), homosexual groups (Clausell & Fiske, 2005) and race regarding African Americans (Shelton et al., 2005). From such work it seems possible that the relevance of warmth, competence and status might vary between cultures. Consequently, as the empirical work will be conducted in both the UK and China. The two chosen countries, UK and China, differ in their cultures, as indicated by the Hofstede measure of culture (Hofstede, 2020), suggesting that any common findings might be generalised more readily than if the research had been in the one culture alone.

Secondly, the research aims to explore the relationship between warmth, competence and status. As summarised above the original SCM held that status judgments are used to inform competence judgments (Fiske et al., 2018) but others have shown that in a commercial context brand status makes its own contribution to the overall evaluation of a brand (Davies et al., 2018). Such issues need clarification through research and this issue in tested in Study 3.

Signalling prestige/status implies in many markets that prices will be higher (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006), while the higher the status/prestige of a product or service, the more positive can be customer attitude towards them (e.g., Hwang & Han, 2013). High status can motivate some customers positively in certain circumstances, but not in others. Signalling theory, Connelly et al., (2011), argues that companies learn which signals are effective for them. In the previous two studies the author has shown that most MEs signal status, implying that this it is beneficial for all MEs to do so. However, this is untested. One possibility is that status signalling might work for some customers and businesses but not for others (Hwang & Han, 2013). Because higher status is often associated with higher prices (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006), signalling status may increase price perception among at least some potential customers.

The specific Research Questions (RQs) related to the Research Objectives for this phase are:

1. What is the outcome of consumer brand engagement behaviour (outcome behaviour and person-brand congruence) with a ME by signalling status and country of the UK and China?
2. Do differences exist in outcome behaviour based on status signalling?
3. Do differences exist in outcome behaviour based on country?
4. What is the outcome of perceived competence with signalling status and country of the UK and China?
5. Do differences exist in perceived competence based on status signalling?
6. Do differences exist in perceived competence based on country?

6.1.2 Research Hypotheses

To address the above RQs, hypotheses are proposed based upon prior work and theory.

From prior work (see 6.1.1) signalling status to potential customers should have an impact on their outcome behaviour (Davies et al., 2018), and. although there is conflicting evidence from prior work, this effect should be positive:

- ❖ H1: Signalling status by an ME will have a positive influence on customer attitudes.

However, the influence of signalling status to potential customers might differ between markets and cultures. In Chapter 2 specific differences were argued between China and the UK in terms how consumers might react to status signals. Chinese consumers often buy brands to signal their sense of status (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014). One explanation is because China is a more collectivist culture than the UK and that collectivists care about how others see them (Shukla, 2010) leading to a greater appreciation of items with status associations. Consequently, signalling status should have a more positive effect on Chinese consumers

- ❖ H2: Chinese consumers will react more positively than UK consumers to status signalling.

H1 and H2 suggest that signalling status will have a direct effect on customer attitudes. However, SCM theory (Fiske et al., 2002, 2007; Russell & Fiske, 2008) argues that status is an antecedent to competence, implying that increasing the status of an ME should increase its perceived competence (but not its warmth).

- ❖ H3 Increasing the perceived status of an ME increases its perceived competence.

One implication of H3 is that the influence of any increase in status on outcomes such as customer attitude will be via perceived competence and not direct.

When researching brand equity outcomes, Keller (2006) recommends comparative methods such as experiments that examine consumer attitudes and behaviours toward a brand. “An experimental design is a plan for assigning experimental units to treatment levels and the statistical analysis associated with the plan” (Kirk, 2012, p.23). Using the experimental method would help test any causal relationship, within an ME context, by isolating the hypothesized causes (here status signals) by comparing the result of a manipulation of status in a controlled way (Shadish et al., 2002).

Regarding the business entity as the social entity, this method has been widely used in the social psychology area and, more recently, is being applied to business and management topics (Andrei et al., 2017). Recent applications of SCM theories to branding also involve experimental designs when testing SCM tenets (some including status) (e.g. Alhouti & D’Souza, 2018; Chattalas et al., 2019; Fang & Lin, 2017; Lee, 2019).

Adopting a factorial design to compare two or more independent variables, the researcher experimentally tested the hypotheses by manipulating a status signal of a fictious micro-enterprise between the targeted country groups. The researcher focused on the home page of the ME’s website, the ‘Who we are’ section, where companies describe themselves. The chosen signal was with an association with luxury brands (or not) with an ME retailing gifts to the public. An association with luxury or up-market brands was one of the signals identified in Study II for example when ME owners talked about which University they had studied at and which prestigious organisations they were members of, and is a frequently used signal type generally (see Kraus et al., 2011; Mattan et al., 2017) Some MEs in Studies I and II signalled status through quality (see also Piazza & Castellucci, 2013), as well as their wealthy resource affiliations / luxury conspicuousness (see also Han et al., 2010). In the control condition, namely without such a signal, similar descriptions were given to respondents, but the status signals were replaced with neutral words.

6.2 Research Design

6.2.1 Subjects

For the data collection, the researcher recruited participants using a professional online panel called Prolific (https://www.prolific.co/). The invitation to participants directed any interested respondents to a website for the online survey containing the experiment. All the participants were mutually exclusive between all "experimental groups", that is the same person did not answer more than one version of the questionnaire. In total, a total of 122 participants (83 female, 39 male) took part in the study (see tables 6.1-3), and they were evenly and randomly assigned to one of the four groups, two had a neutral description of the ME, two had a version with enhanced status. The two control groups had a neutral version of the survey in either English or Chinese, and the two treatment groups had the increased status survey versions in either English or Chinese. The survey was developed in English and translated into Chinese for Chinese respondents, then back translated into English to test for equivalency and for any inconsistencies by another expert translator. Respondents were offered one pound as an incentive for responding. Respondent demographics are given in Tables 6.1 to 6.3.

Table 6-1 - Descriptive statistics of participants' age

Country			Frequency	Percent
UK	Valid	Less than 20	2	3.3
		20-29	31	50.8
		30-39	17	27.9
		40-49	5	8.2
		50-59	3	4.9
		60 and above	3	4.9
		Total	61	100.0
China	Valid	Less than 20	1	1.6
		20-29	32	52.5
		30-39	27	44.3
		40-49	1	1.6
		Total	61	100.0

Table 6-2 - Descriptive statistics of participants' gender

Country			Frequency	Percent
UK	Valid	Female	45	73.8
		Male	16	26.2
		Total	61	100.0
China	Valid	Female	38	62.3
		Male	23	37.7
		Total	61	100.0

Table 6-3 - Descriptive statistics of participants' education level

Country			Frequency	Percent
UK	Valid	About 16 (GCSE O level, CSE, etc.)	7	11.5
		About 18 (GCSE A level, OND, etc.)	17	27.9
		Undergraduate degree (BSc, BA, etc.)	26	42.6
		Postgraduate degree (MSc, MA, MBA, PhD, etc.)	11	18.0
		Total	61	100.0
China	Valid	About 18 (GCSE A level, OND, etc.)	5	8.2
		Undergraduate degree (BSc, BA, etc.)	11	18.0
		Postgraduate degree (MSc, MA, MBA, PhD, etc.)	45	73.8
		Total	61	100.0

6.2.2 Experiment Design

Based on the RQs and hypotheses, the experiment employed a 2 (Status signal) x 2 (Country) between-subjects factorial design in which the researcher manipulated status signals (an association with luxury brands mentioned, no luxury brands mentioned) by exposing the two treatment groups (UK and China) to a situation in which participants had to make an evaluation of a (fictious) small gift company. Thus, the researcher created four experimental groups.

All participants read the description of a fictitious online gift business from which they were asked to imagine they were going to buy a gift for a friend whom they wanted to impress. They were told that they came across the business on-line and that they were interested in it. They were then asked for their impressions of the online gift business.

Half of the British and Chinese samples were told that the company marketed specific luxury brands, the other half not. The two versions of the questionnaires are appended (see Appendix 1 & 2). The signal was chosen because it had been used by companies in the qualitative phases of this research. After reading the company description participants rated the company on perceived status, warmth and competence and asked about their intentions towards the company. The two descriptions of the gifting ME were as follows:

Neutral Version

> "We aim to have a range of gifts to suit a wide range of age groups and budgets. Our gifts are selected for all kinds of event, birthdays, celebrations and many other special occasions. Please browse through our website and see if we have what you are looking for or for ideas that might suit the occasion and those you are buying for. When we created our business, we wanted to offer something different, and we hope you like what you see."

Enhanced Status Version

> "We select our gifts for all kinds of event, birthdays, celebrations and many other special occasions. Please browse through our website for ideas that might suit that special occasion and the person you are buying for. All of the brands we carry are highly respected. We offer a range of luxury brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton as well as other highly desirable brands we have chosen from around the world. We hope you like what you see."

Several pre-tests had been conducted to test various signals of status before selecting the material used here. Manipulation checks were also used to confirm whether perceived status was increased when the status signal was used. Reliability tests, Cronbach alpha value ($\alpha > 0.7$), were performed to ensure the validity of scales.

6.2.3 Measures

Outcome Measures

Prior work has considered several such outcomes of brand personality (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013) from which I chose an overall measure of attitude (labelled as outcome behaviour) and consumer-brand congruence. These reflect the most frequently adopted focal measures in brand personality research (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013). Consumer-Brand congruence or congruence as I will label it, which concerns the matching of personal and brand image, has also been used to explain brand preference for corporate brands (Bellenger et al., 1976; Sirgy et al., 2000).

The image of brands with their symbolic meanings contribute to consumers' self-meanings, particularly when making consumption choices (Elliott, 1997; Graeff, 1996). The meaning of “self”, as a concept, has been viewed as the totality of a consumer's thoughts and feelings with reference to themselves as an object (Rosenberg, 1986). Evidence suggests that brand-person congruence is among the most important factors for predicting consumer behaviour. Borrowing its roots from the field of psychology, it denotes the willingness of consumers to compare themselves with brands, and to determine whether the brand matches their perception of themselves (Sirgy, 1985). Supported by Elliott (1997), consumers seek congruence between their actions and their self-concept, which can materialize in purchase of products congruent with their self-concept and personality.

According to Sirgy (1982), the similarity between consumers and their brands implies that consumers identify their brands with themselves to help shape their own identities, these include the ideal self-image, the actual self-image, the social self-image, and the ideal social self-image. More recent research has reinforced the strong effect of congruence in explaining consumer responses. Kleijnen et al. (2005) proved that image congruence seems to have a substantial effect on consumers' evaluations. Bajac et al. (2018) showed that both product-personality congruence and user-image congruence are implicitly seen in perceived relationships between a consumer and a brand. Tuškej et al. (2013) also found that congruity of consumer and brand values tends to have a positive influence on consumers' commitment to and image of the brand.

The theory of planned behaviour proposes that a person's stated intention (here for example to buy from the gift business) will help explain actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The major tenet of the theory is that behavioural intention is the best determinant of human social behaviour. The same relationship is argued in other models of human behaviour (Fishbein & Cappella, 2006). Empirical evidence suggests that the theory works in practice (e.g., Kim et al., 2004; Wee et al., 2014).

An author derived scale was used to measure "outcome behaviour" "I would recommend this business to friends and colleagues", "If I wanted a gift, I would seriously consider buying from this business" and "I think I would enjoy working with this business". Participants provided their answers on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). It proved reliable (α = .900).

Brand- person congruence was measured with three items adapted from Tuškej et al. (2013): I feel that my personality and the personality of this business are very similar; I think I would feel a lot in common with other people using this business and; I feel that my values and the values of this business are very similar using the same response scale. It proved reliable (α = .93).

Brand image measures were: Perceived status (α = .876) which included 6 items: prestigious, exclusive, sophisticated, reputable, posh and glamorous (from Davies et al., 2018). Perceived warmth (α = .941) included 6 items: friendly, well intentioned, trustworthy, warm, good natured, sincere, and the scale of perceived competence (α = .886) also has 6 items: competent, confident, conscientious, efficient, intelligent and skilful (from Wu et al., 2016). A 7- point scales was used ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Control Variables

Basic demographic information (age, gender, education level) of participants were collected as potential control variables representing a range of relevant demographic variables in influencing attitudes towards gift purchasing (Laroche et al., 2000; Laroche et al., 2004; Yau et al., 1999).

Human personality is thought to moderate the relationship between self-image/product image congruity and consumer behaviour when interacting with brands (Elliott, 1997; Sirgy, 1985). As mentioned earlier, consumer personality can play a crucial role in mediating the effects of culture (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2011). Personal orientation has received more attention as a consumer's behaviour with brands pertains to the similarity between individuals' values and the values delivered by brands, however this can also be underpinned by self-concept and intrinsic personality (Godey et al., 2013; O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014).

There is a considerable consensus among social scientists and psychologists of the "Big Five" model as a stable, robust, and reliable description of personality (Goldberg, 1993). The dimensions of the Big Five are: Extraversion or Surgency (active, assertive, energetic, enthusiastic, outgoing and talkative); agreeableness (cooperative, appreciative, forgiving, generous, good-natured, sympathetic and trustful); conscientiousness (efficient, organised, planful, reliable, responsible and dependable); emotional stability or neuroticism (anxious, self-pitying, tense, touchy, unstable and easily upset); openness or Intellect (artistic, intellectual, curious, imaginative, insightful, original and wide-interests) (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992).

To meet the demand for efficient yet psychometrically sound measures, researchers have put effort into refining the initial overly long scales of up to hundreds of items (Burisch, 1997; Costa & McRae, 1992; Goldberg, 1992) into shorter scales, such as the 10-item version of Gosling et al. (2003) which was used here. According to Geuens et al. (2009), such shorter scales balance the demands of brevity versus reliability and validity.

Findings from the empirical study of Schmitt (2004) has shown satisfactory levels of internal reliability, and robust results in similar five-dimensional structures when replicated across cultures. Their research revealed that the total congruence coefficient for Big Five Inventory (BFI) in Southeast countries are below .90 when rotated to the US' BFI factor structure, which confirms that the Big Five human personality dimensions are a reliable human personality measurement approach across cultures.

A measure of status seeking was included as a possible way to help explain differences in attitude towards status signalling. Status seeking is a psychographic characteristic which has been included in studies of up-market or prestige brand purchase (e.g., Yang & Mattila 2014; Latter et al. 2010). Here the measure of Flynn et al. (2006) was adopted the current context are "I want my peers to respect me and hold me in high esteem", "Being a highly valued member of my social group is important to me.", "I would like to cultivate the admiration of my peers", "I enjoy having influence over other people's decision making.", "It would please me to have a position of prestige and social standing", "I care about how positively others view me.", "I don't care whether others view me with respect and hold me in esteem.", "I am not concerned with my status among my peers".

Process Variables

From the pilot studies conducted for Study 3 it was recognised that status signalling might have a negative as well as a positive effect on respondents due, for example, to the signal being interpreted as a business with high prices. From this work, three questions were added to test various explanations for any negative reaction to status signalling: "I think the prices charged by this business would be higher than those charged by similar businesses", "I think this company is trying too hard to impress the customer" and "I think the company provided too much irrelevant information".

The two versions of the questionnaires are given in Appendix 1-2. Two other constructs were included in these, but as they proved to lack reliability (low Cronbach alphas) their potential contribution is not considered further.

6.3 Findings

6.3.1 Manipulation Check

The manipulation of status proved successful. It was expected that perceived status will be greater for the increased status version of the questionnaire. To test this, a t-test for independent samples was used. Results reveals that consumers perceived significantly more status for the ME when the status signal was in place (*M* = 4.86, *SD* = .98), relative to when presented with the neutral business profile (*M* = 4.08, *SD* = .87), $t(118.25) = -4.617$, $p < .001$ (Table 6.4).

Table 6-4 - T-test: descriptive statistics of status

	Survey Version	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
status	Initial Neutral Version	61	4.08	.867
	Increased Status Version	61	4.86	.980

The manipulation check was also valid for both countries (Table 6.5). For the UK, the increased status version (*M* = 4.92, *SD* = 1.05) was significantly higher than the initial neutral version (*M* = 4.09, *SD* =.88), $t(59) = -3.361$, $p = .001$. For China, the increased status version (*M* = 4.79, *SD* = .92) was also significantly higher than in the initial neutral version (*M* = 4.07, *SD* =.87), $t(59) = -3.127$, $p = .003$.

Table 6-5 - T-test: descriptive statistics of status (split file layered by Country)

Country		Survey Version	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
UK	status	Initial Neutral Version	31	4.09	.878
		Increased Status Version	30	4.92	1.05
China	status	Initial Neutral Version	30	4.07	.871
		Increased Status Version	31	4.79	.921

To test the effect of manipulating status and country together a two-way ANOVA test was used. The initial DV was status and the independent variables were questionnaire type (Neutral Version = 0 and Increased Status Version = 1) and Country/nationality (UK =0 and China = 1). As Table 6.6 shows there are significant effects only for questionnaire type (Surveyversion) ($p < .001$). The lack of a main or interaction effect from Country suggested that the manipulation effects were similar between countries.

*Table 6-6 - ANOVA test: country*survey version & status*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	18.5[a]	3	6.17	7.11	.000	.153
Intercept	2440	1	2440	2810	.000	.960
Country	.174	1	.174	.200	.655	.002
Surveyversion	18.3	1	18.3	21.1	.000	.152
Country* Surveyversion	.097	1	.097	.112	.739	.001
Error	102	118	.868			
Total	2557.028	122				
Corrected Total	121	121				

a. R Squared = .153 (Adjusted R Squared = .132)

*Estimated Marginal Means Country * Survey Version*

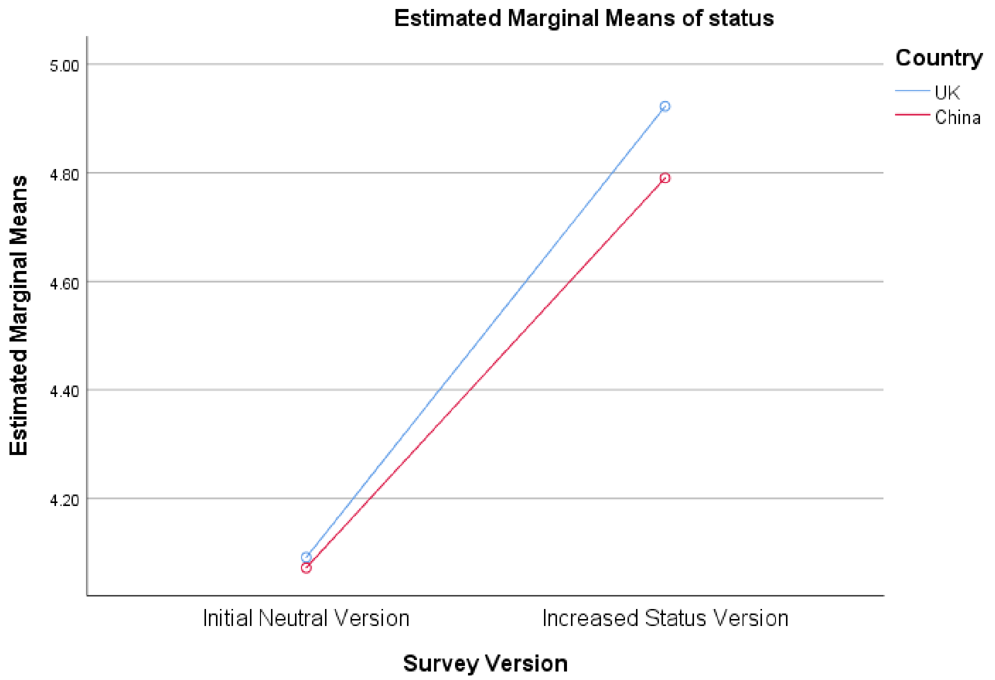
Dependent Variable: status

Country	Survey Version	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound
UK	Initial Neutral Version	4.09	.167	3.76	4.42
	Increased Status Version	4.92	.170	4.56	5.26
China	Initial Neutral Version	4.07	.170	3.74	4.41
	Increased Status Version	4.79	.167	4.46	5.12

According to Cohen's rules of thumb on the effect size of ANOVA, a value of 0.14 for partial eta squared is considered large, 0.01 is small (Cohen, 2013). The statistically significant effect of survey version on status, $F(1, 118) = 21.075$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta_p^2 = .152$ can be considered to be large.

The graph below also shows (see Figure 6.1) that the effects of increasing status by country are very similar but slightly different for Chinese respondents with less of an increase in the rating of status.

Figure 6-1 - Estimated marginal means of status



When all the control variables were included, the significance of the interaction effect reduced to .508, i.e., it became slightly more significant, but the high level of significance for the survey type remained (p<.001). Only age out of the controls was significant.

*Table 6-7- ANOVA test: control variables*survey version & status*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	29.2[a]	12	2.48	2.90	.002
Intercept	50.1	1	50.1	59.6	.000
PExtravert	.008	1	.008	.010	.921
PAgreeable	2.65	1	2.65	3.16	.079
PConscientious	1.49	1	1.49	1.78	.185
PEmotStab	.108	1	.108	.128	.721
POTE	.829	1	.829	.986	.323
age	4.77	1	4.77	5.67	.019
Gender	1.08	1	1.08	1.28	.260
education	.034	1	.034	.041	.841
status_seeking	.332	1	.332	.395	.531
Country	.069	1	.069	.082	.774
Surveyversion	18.6	1	18.6	22.1	.000
Country * Surveyversion	.371	1	.371	.442	.508
Error	91.7	109	.841		
Total	2560	122			
Corrected Total	121	121			

a. R Squared = .242 (Adjusted R Squared = .158)

Whether the difference in effect of the manipulation between countries is significant is an issue. When age alone was used as a covariate the interaction effect was again not significant (p= .375) while the main effect from survey type was significant. In summary the manipulation succeeded in that status was increased significantly as a consequence of the manipulation.

6.3.2 Hypotheses Testing

6.3.2.1 Effects of signalling status on outcome behaviour

The hypotheses were tested for the effect on outcome behaviour (DV) when manipulating the status signal and when considering the nationality of the respondent using two-way ANOVA.

As demonstrated by Table 6.8, there was a statistically significant interaction between survey version and country on outcome behaviour, $F(1{,}118) = 7.85,\ p = .006$ when predicting the outcome behaviour. There was also a statistically significant main effect of survey version on outcome behaviour, $F(1{,}118) = 9.67,\ p = .002$. However, there was no statistically significant main effect of country on outcome behaviour, $F(1{,}118) = 2.92,\ p = .090$. In other words, the effect of country was only from its interaction with the status signal.

*Table 6-8 - ANOVA test: country*survey version & outcome behaviour*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	32.9[a]	3	11.0	6.76	.000
Intercept	2260	1	2260	1390	.000
Country	4.74	1	4.74	2.92	.090
Surveyversion	15.7	1	15.7	9.67	.002
Country * Surveyversion	12.7	1	12.7	7.84	.006
Error	191	118	1.62		
Total	2490	122			
Corrected Total	224	121			

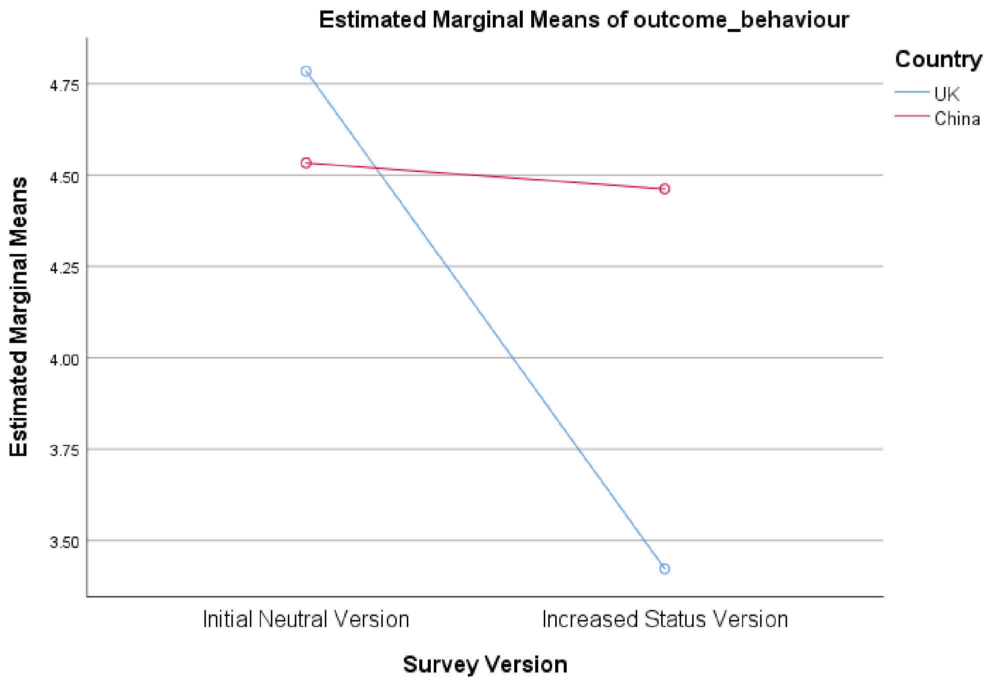
a. R Squared = .147 (Adjusted R Squared = .125)

Estimated Marginal Means

Country	Survey Version	Mean
	Initial Neutral Version	4.76
UK	Increased Status Version	3.42
China	Initial Neutral Version	4.53
	Increased Status Version	4.46

However, the estimated marginal means (EM Means) show that the outcome behaviour of both countries decreases (UK: $M_{neutral} = 4.79 > M_{increased} = 3.42$, China: $M_{neutral} = 4.53 > M_{increased} = 4.46$), that is, respondents evaluated the business less positively when status was enhanced than they did in the neutral version, which is opposite to what the researcher might have expected and contrary to H1. The effect is shown graphically in Figure 6.2 emphasising the country effect.

Figure 6-2 - Estimated marginal means of outcome behaviour



It is noticeable that the drop in the Estimated Marginal Means in China was less than it was in the UK. To check this in more detail, an independent samples t-test was used. From the result (see Table 6.9), the drop in outcome for the UK is significant ($p < .001$) whereas it is not significant in China ($p = .800$).

Table 6-9 - Independent samples t-test: outcome behaviour

Country		Survey Version	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
UK	outcome_behaviour	Initial Neutral Version	31	4.80	1.25
		Increased Status Version	30	3.42	1.60
China	outcome_behaviour	Initial Neutral Version	30	4.53	.89
		Increased Status Version	31	4.46	1.26

As shown by the two-way ANOVA test (see Table 6.10), the status signal gave a reduction in outcome behaviour, and there is a country effect as the drop for China is not on its own significant as shown by the t-test.

To further examine the effect of the manipulation on outcome behaviour, the test was repeated for each of the three questions used to measure outcome behaviour.

1. "*Please rate [I would recommend this business to friends and colleagues]"*;
2. "*Please rate [If I wanted a gift, I would seriously consider buying from this business]*";
3. "*Please rate [I think I would enjoy working with this business]*".

There were similar, significant effects for all three as for when they were combined, but the levels were highest for the second question. Here there was a statistically significant interaction effect between country and survey version on the second question, $F(1{,}118) = 7.70,\ p = .006$, but there was also a statistically significant main effect of country on the question, $F(1{,}118) = 5.09,\ p = .026$. There was as before a main effect of survey version, $F(1{,}118) = 13.97,\ p < .001$. (Table 6.10).

*Table 6-10 - ANOVA test: country*survey version & the 2nd item in outcome behaviour*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	55.2[a]	3	18.4	8.83	.000
Intercept	2340	1	2340	1120	.000
Country	10.6	1	10.6	5.09	.026
Surveyversion	29.1	1	29.10	13.97	.000
Country * Surveyversion	16.0	1	16.04	7.70	.006
Error	246	118	2.082		
Total	2650	122			
Corrected Total	301	121			

R Squared = .183 (Adjusted R Squared = .163)

Estimated Marginal Means

Country	Survey Version	Mean
	Initial Neutral Version	4.94
UK	Increased Status Version	3.23
China	Initial Neutral Version	4.80
	Increased Status Version	4.55

Finally, the control variables were added as in the original 2-way ANOVA to predict behavioural outcome (Table 6.7). None proved significant and the effect of adding them was to make small changes to the significance level of the three main variables of interest Country p=.004, Survey version p= .001 and their interaction p=.007. The graphical representation of the estimated marginal means was almost identical to that shown in Figure 6.2.

To sum up, the drop in outcome behaviour is statistically real, and across each of the three questions of the outcome behaviour scale. Also, as the researcher expected, as the experiment is about 'gifting', the most useful variable in terms of the ability to explain things is '*If I wanted a gift, I would seriously consider buying from this business*'.

The main analyses in the previous section were repeated for the outcome of brand-person congruence.

Table 6-11 - Effects of Signalling Status on Brand-Person Congruence

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	40.9[a]	3	13.6	8.41	.000
Intercept	1650	1	1650	1020	.000
Sversio	20.3	1	20.3	12.5	.001
Country	6.49	1	6.49	4.01	.048
Sversio * Country	14.4	1	14.4	8.90	.003
Error	190	118	1.62		
Total	1890	122			
Corrected Total	232	121			

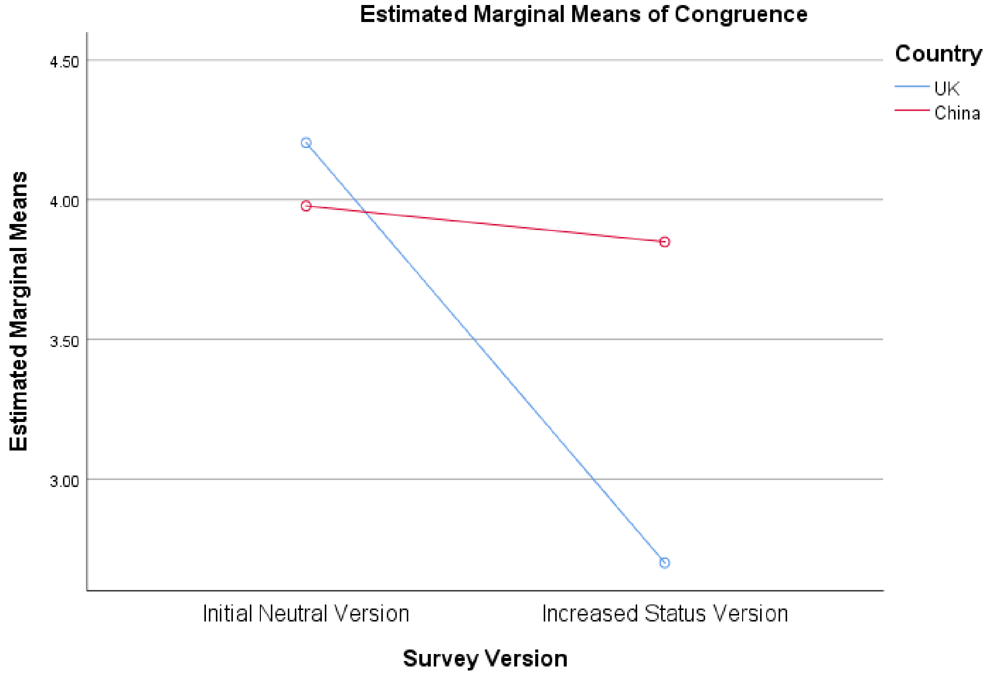
a. R Squared = .176 (Adjusted R Squared = .155)

Estimated Marginal Means

Country	Survey Version	Mean
	Initial Neutral Version	4.20
UK	Increased Status Version	2.70
China	Initial Neutral Version	3.98
	Increased Status Version	3.85

Congruence and outcome behaviour correlate strongly (Pearson Correlation= 0.71 p<.001). The findings are then not surprisingly almost identical to those for the first DV (outcome behaviour) other than that the direct effect of country is now significant (p=.048) without adding the control variables (see Table 6.11). Chinese respondents gave less positive responses to both versions of the questionnaire but the drop in person-brand congruence ratings when assessing the second questionnaire was this time significant. For both countries the evaluation of the business with increased status was again less favourable. Figure 6.3 shows the estimated marginal means data for Table 6.11 in graphical form.

Figure 6-3 - Estimated marginal means of congruence



When the control variables were included, none were significant, and their effect was to improve the significance levels of the three main variables slightly Country p=.004, Survey version p= .001 and their interaction p=.005.

H1: Signalling status will have a positive influence on customer attitudes is not supported.

Chinese respondents gave more positive responses to the increased status version supporting H2, that Chinese consumers will react more positively than UK consumers to status signalling. That said the data show that the same negative effect from status signalling was seen from both groups.

6.3.2.2 Effects of signalling status on perceived competence

The effect on competence (as a DV) when manipulating the status signal and when considering the nationality of the respondent was tested using two-way ANOVA.

As demonstrated by Table 6.12, there was no statistically significant interaction between survey version and country on competence, $F(1{,}118) = 1.589,\ p = .210$. There was also no statistically significant main effect of survey version on competence, $F(1{,}118) = .141,\ p = .707$. There was no statistically significant main effect of country on competence, $F(1{,}118) = .117,\ p = .733$.

*Table 6-12 - ANOVA test: country*survey version & competence*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1.35[a]	3	.449	.614	.607
Intercept	2430	1	2430	3330	.000
Surveyversion	.103	1	.103	.141	.707
Country	.085	1	.085	.117	.733
Surveyversion * Country	1.16	1	1.161	1.589	.210
Error	86.3	118	.731		
Total	2520	122			
Corrected Total	87.6	121			

a. R Squared = .015 (Adjusted R Squared = -.010)

Estimated Marginal Means

Survey Version	Country	Mean
	UK	4.56
Initial Neutral Version	China	4.31
Increased Status Version	UK	4.42
	China	4.57

The EM means suggested a slight difference between British and Chinese consumers: and there was a minor decrease on perceived competence for British responses when increasing the status signal. However, independent t-tests (see Table 6.13) showed the differences were not significant UK $t(61) = .525$, $p = .601$ and China $t(61) = -1.522$, $p = .134$.

Table 6-13 - T-test: Descriptive Statistics for Competence

Country		Survey Version	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
UK	competence	Initial Neutral Version	31	4.56	1.25
		Increased Status Version	30	4.42	.707
China	competence	Initial Neutral Version	30	4.31	.574
		Increased Status Version	31	4.56	.721

Contrary to expectations from the SCM, a significant increase in status did not produce a significant increase in perceived competence. H3 Increasing the perceived status of an ME increases its perceived competence is not supported by the data and in the case of the UK data the effect is the reverse of that expected.

6.3.2.3 Effects of signalling status on perceived warmth

The effect on warmth (as a DV) when manipulating the status signal and when considering the nationality of the respondent was considered using two-way ANOVA.

As demonstrated by Table 6.14, there was a statistically significant interaction between survey version and country on warmth, $F(1,118) = 6.504, p = .012$. There was also a statistically significant main effect of survey version on warmth, $F(1,118) = 19.389, p < .001$. However, there was no statistically significant main effect of country on warmth, $F(1,118) = .017, p = .896$.

Table 6-14 - ANOVA test: signalling status & country on warmth

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	24.0[a]	3	8.01	8.65	.000
Intercept	2880	1	2880	3110	.000
Surveyversion	18.0	1	18.0	19.4	.000
Country	.016	1	.016	.017	.896
Surveyversion * Country	6.02	1	6.02	6.50	.012
Error	109	118	.926		
Total	3020	122			
Corrected Total	133	121			

a. R Squared = .180 (Adjusted R Squared = .159)

Estimated Marginal Means

Survey Version	Country	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Initial Neutral Version	UK	5.48	.173	5.14	5.82
	China	5.01	.176	4.66	5.34
Increased Status Version	UK	4.27	.176	3.92	4.62
	China	4.69	.173	4.35	5.03

An independent sample t-test was run to determine if there were differences in warmth when manipulating status, comparing the two countries (Table 6.15). For the British participants, the perceived warmth of the ME for the increased status version (M = 4.27, SD = 1.07) is significantly lower than from than the neutral version (M = 5.48, SD = 1.18), $t(59) = 4.20$, $p < .001$. However, there is no significant differences (p=.104) between Chinese increased status version (M = 4.69, SD = .85) and the neutral version (M = 5.01, SD = .66), $t(59) = 1.65$, $p = .104$, although warmth seems to drop as well.

Table 6-15 - T-test: descriptive statistics for warmth

Country		Survey Version	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
UK	warmth	Initial Neutral Version	31	5.48	1.18
		Increased Status Version	30	4.27	1.07
China	warmth	Initial Neutral Version	30	5.01	.661
		Increased Status Version	31	4.69	.851

A multiple regression test was used to see if perceived warmth, competence and status can predict outcome behaviour. The results revealed that only warmth predicts outcome behaviour (β = .511, $p < .001$). Whether or not signalling status is used, consumers only rely on perceived warmth to make judgement of their attitude to wards the ME. An identical result was obtained when congruence was used as the DV with warmth again being the only significant predictor (β = .444, $p < .001$).

6.3.3 Control Variables

Control variables were included to check whether they might influence the findings and this section considers their influence in more detail than above. To explore whether their effect was more specific, the main two-way ANOVA was repeated first including just age, gender, and education as controls (see Table 6.16), but none of the controls were significant: for age, $F(1{,}115) = 3.19,\ p = .077$; for gender, $F(1{,}115) = .64,\ p = .42$; for education, $F(1{,}115) = 2.14,\ p = .147$, the overall results of significance levels of the interaction between country and survey version on outcome behaviour $F(1{,}115) = 6.00,\ p = .016$ as well as two main effects of country $F(1{,}115) = 4.00,\ p = .048$ and of survey version $F(1{,}115) = 8.40,\ p = .004$ were similar. While the main effect of country without the controls was not significant including them made it significant (*p* = .048) but only just. All other effects remained similarly significant.

Table 6-16 - ANOVA test: Demographic control variables on outcome behaviour

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	43.7[a]	6	7.29	4.65	.000
Intercept	159	1	159	101	.000
age	5.01	1	5.01	3.19	.077
Gender	1.01	1	1.01	.643	.424
education	3.35	1	3.35	2.16	.147
Country	6.26	1	6.26	3.99	.048
Surveyversion	13.2	1	13.2	8.41	.004
Country * Surveyversion	9.41	1	9.41	6.00	.016
Error	180	115	1.57		
Total	2490	122			
Corrected Total	224	121			

a. R Squared = .195 (Adjusted R Squared = .153)

Estimated Marginal Means

Country	Survey Version	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound
UK	Initial Neutral Version	4.64[a]	.234	4.18	5.11
	Increased Status Version	3.40[a]	.259	2.88	3.91
China	Initial Neutral Version	4.63[a]	.242	4.15	5.11
	Increased Status Version	4.54[a]	.242	4.06	5.02

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: What is your age? = 2.61, And your Gender? = .32, At what stage did you finish full time education? Please select one box only (if you are still in education please select the stage you are at currently). = 3.16.

There was a similar effect when the DV was changed to congruence.

When personality measures were included as control variables on their own there was a similar but more marked effect in that the significance of both survey type, country and their interaction increased for both outcomes, even though no personality dimension was significant when the DV was behavioural outcome and only Conscientiousness was (just) significant when the DV was congruence (p=.044). When status seeking was included on its own as a control variable it was significant (p=.038) in the ANOVA to predict congruence but not that to predict outcome. Finally, all the control variables were included together. Tables 6.17 and 6.18 provide the analyses when predicting outcome behaviour and congruence respectively.

Table 6-17 - ANOVA test: All control variables on outcome behaviour

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	59.5[a]	12	4.96	3.28	.000
Intercept	52.8	1	52.8	35.0	.000
PExtravert	4.21	1	4.21	2.79	.098
PAgreeable	.292	1	.292	.194	.661
PConscientious	4.67	1	4.67	3.09	.082
PEmotStab	.000	1	.000	.000	.988
POTE	.998	1	.998	.661	.418
age	4.79	1	4.79	3.17	.078
Gender	.318	1	.318	.211	.647
education	3.25	1	3.25	2.15	.146
status_seeking	.074	1	.074	.049	.825
Country	10.1	1	10.1	6.67	.011
Surveyversion	12.6	1	12.6	8.35	.005
Country * Surveyversion	11.1	1	11.0	7.28	.008
Error	165	109	1.51		
Total	2490	122			
Corrected Total	224	121			

a. R Squared = .265 (Adjusted R Squared = .185)

Country * Survey Version

Estimated Marginal Means

Country	Survey Version	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
UK	Initial Neutral Version	4.56[a]	.237	4.09	5.03
	Increased Status Version	3.26[a]	.269	2.72	3.79
China	Initial Neutral Version	4.71[a]	.250	4.22	5.21
	Increased Status Version	4.68[a]	.246	4.19	5.17

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: PExtravert = -.5738, PAgreeable = 1.4754, PConscientious = 2.3361, PEmotStab = .5738, POTE = 1.8115, What is your age? = 2.61, And your Gender? = .32, Education = 3.16, status_seeking = 4.7234.

Table 6-18 - ANOVA test: All control variables on Congruence

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	59.9[a]	12	5.00	3.16	.001
Intercept	23.8	1	23.8	15.0	.000
PExtravert	1.44	1	1.44	.913	.341
PAgreeable	1.25	1	1.25	.790	.376
PConscientious	5.66	1	5.66	3.58	.061
PEmotStab	.057	1	.057	.036	.849
POTE	1.54	1	1.54	.974	.326
age	.040	1	.040	.025	.875
Gender	.432	1	.432	.273	.602
education	3.52	1	3.52	2.22	.138
status_seeking	2.24	1	2.24	1.42	.236
Country	13.4	1	13.3	8.45	.004
Surveyversion	20.0	1	20.0	12.6	.001
Country * Surveyversion	13.0	1	13.0	8.22	.005
Error	172	109	1.58		
Total	1890	122			
Corrected Total	232	121			

a. R Squared = .258 (Adjusted R Squared = .176)

Estimated Marginal Means

Dependent Variable: Congruence

Country	Survey Version	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
UK	Initial Neutral Version	3.99[a]	.243	3.51	4.48
	Increased Status Version	2.46[a]	.275	1.92	3.01
China	Initial Neutral Version	4.21[a]	.255	3.71	4.72
	Increased Status Version	4.06[a]	.252	3.56	4.56

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: PExtravert = -.5738, PAgreeable = 1.4754, PConscientious = 2.3361, PEmotStab = .5738, POTE = 1.8115, What is your age? = 2.61, And your Gender? = .32, Education = 3.16, status_seeking = 4.7234.

When all control variables were included together, none proved significant at p<.05. With all present the significance of the three terms of most relevance were, when predicting behavioural outcome, country p= .011, survey type p=.005, interaction term p=.008 and when predicting congruence country p= .001, survey type p=.001, interaction term p=.005. Without the controls the significance of these three terms tended to be slightly lower. As the tables show some control variables could be significant in certain circumstances but including all or just one type makes little difference to the hypotheses testing. When signalling status, the mean response was a reduction in customer attitude which was significant. There was a significant country effect but the reduction in customer attitude occurred in both country samples. The fact that the significance of the main variables of note was generally increased when control variables were included lends further support to these findings.

Even though the data sample varies in terms of age, gender, personality and education, controlling for such effects does not make any difference for the observation that increasing status resulted in a decline in outcome behaviour. However, the reduction was only significant among the UK sample.

6.3.4 Mediation Effects

That signalling status does not positively predict outcome behaviour needs further investigation. Mediation effects and the unexpected results are discussed in this section which concerns what has been labelled as ‘the status paradox’ (Garcia et al., 2018) where an increase of status causes a reduction in attitude such as outcome behaviour where the opposite might be expected.

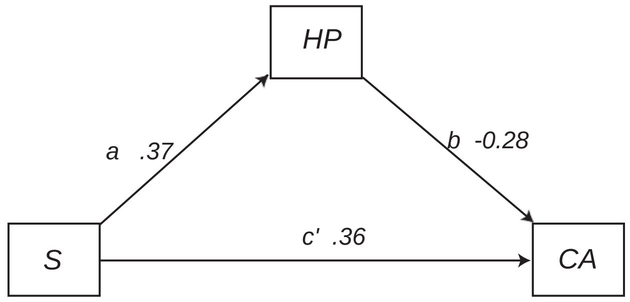
Mediation effects happen when a mediator exists between an independent variable (predictor) and a dependent variable (result), which serves as a trigger or an explanation for the interaction of the two variables. Through this mediator, the relationship between the predictor and the result is strengthened or weakened (Hayes, 2017). Considering mediation effects could be helpful here when explaining the negative impact that improving status produces on outcome behaviour and congruence.

The Hayes’ PROCESS macro version 4.0 for SPSS, is an extra piece of software written for SPSS which makes checking for moderation and mediation effects much easier (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Model number. 4, a simple basic mediation model, was used. The Y variable is the outcome behaviour or congruence, and the X variable is status (high or low). The M variable was one of three questions had been included to explain any negative effects from signalling status, “I think the prices charged by this business would be higher than those charged by similar businesses”, “I think this company is trying too hard to impress the customer” and I think the company provided too much irrelevant information.

6.3.4.1 Effect of Higher Prices (HP) on Status (S) and Consumer Attitude (CA)

Figure 6-4 -Structural diagram of mediation: higher prices on status & customer attitude



The test examines the impact of perceived status on outcome behaviour or congruence as mediated by first the perception of higher prices being charged than by other businesses (Figure 6.4). The test used the full data set together (n= 122). A series of regression analyses were carried out to test the idea that the reduction in outcome behaviour (for example that the respondent would buy from the gift business) can be explained due to the perception that higher status implies higher prices. The indirect and total effects in the model were tested using bootstrap samples. The results show that overall perceived status positively predicts outcome behaviour (b = .26, t(120) = 2.13, p = .035). Analysing the indirect effects, the results revealed that higher prices significantly mediates the relationship between perceived status and outcome behaviour b = -0.10, *SE* = .05, 95% *CI* [-0.20, -0.01]. The mediation is significant at better than .05 because the confidence limits (CI) do not include zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Perceived status positively affects perceived higher prices (path a, b = .37, t(120) = 3.27, p = .001) and higher prices, in turn, negatively affects outcome behaviour (path b, b =-0.28, t(119) = -2.88, p =.005). However, perceived status now has a positive direct impact on outcome behaviour (path c', b = .36, t(119) = 2.92, p = .004).

The status signal of associating the gift business with up market brands created the impression that the business was expensive. This had a negative effect on outcomes such as willingness to shop with them. At the same time the effect of signalling had a positive impact on the same outcome (the direct effect). The two effects were in different directions but the influence of being overly priced was greater than the expected influence of increased status.

This helps explains why the manipulation did not produce higher outcome behaviour as some people would be worried the status signal means higher prices. However, others will still buy gifts and some become even more likely to buy.

6.3.4.2 Effect of Trying Too Hard on Status and Outcome Behaviour

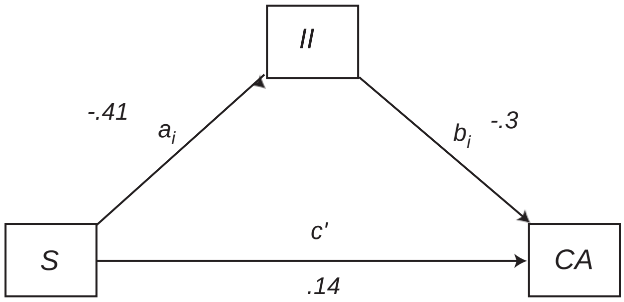
I tested whether the effect of perceived status on consumer outcome behaviour is mediated by the consumer thinking of the business is trying too hard to please them.

There was no mediation effect of "trying too hard". For X (status) predicting M (trying too hard), the path is not significant with b = -0.16, $t(120)$ = -1.18, p = .239. For X (status) predicting Y (outcome), the path is not significant with b=.20, $t(119)$ = 1.79, p =.076. For M (trying too hard) predicting Y (outcome), the path is significant with b = -.37, $t(119)$ = -4.82, p < .001. The Indirect *effect* =.06, *SE*=.06, 95% CI [-0.05,.17], and there is no mediation because CI includes zero.

6.3.4.3 Effect of Irrelevant Information on Status and Customer Attitude

Finally, I tested whether the effect of perceived status on consumer outcome behaviour is mediated by the consumer thinking of the business is presenting irrelevant information to them, (see Figure 6.5). The indirect and total effects in the model are tested using bootstrap samples. The default setting for confidence intervals is 95%.

Figure 6-5 - Structural diagram of mediation: irrelevant information on status & customer attitude



The result shows that (overall) perceived status positively predicts outcome behaviour (b = .26, t(120) = 2.13, p = .035). However, analysing the indirect effects, the results revealed that seeing the company as providing irrelevant information significantly mediates the relationship between perceived status and outcome behaviour (b = .12, SE = .06, 95% CI [0.02, 0.26]. The higher was perceived status, the higher the business was seen as providing irrelevant information (path a, b = -.41, t(120) = -3.08, p = .003) and irrelevant information, in turn, negatively affects outcome behaviour (path b, b = -.30, t(119) = -3.78, p < .001). The mediating effect of perceived irrelevant information was total as the direct effect became non-significant (path c, b = .14, t(119) = 1.14, p = .258). To conclude, giving too much irrelevant information completely mediates the relationship between status and outcome behaviour.

In summary there are two mediators which can explain why signalling status might produce a negative effect on the behaviour of potential customers: higher prices and irrelevant information. There is no significant correlation between them (p = .697) implying that the effects are different.

With congruence as the DV the findings were slightly different. The perception of higher prices did not mediate the relationship between the perceived status of the brand and brand-person congruence, (although the effect was close to being significant at p = .05). However, the perception that the company were providing too much irrelevant information did mediate the relationship significantly (at p=.05).

6.3.4.4 Effect of Irrelevant Information on Status and Competence

The Process macro, model number 4 was used to test why signalling status did not have the expected positive effect on perceived competence using the same three variables as above. Only one "irrelevant information" proved to be a significant mediator.

The result shows that (overall) perceived status positively predicts perceived competence (b = .45, $t(120)$ = 6.78, p < .001). Analysing the indirect effects, results revealed that irrelevant information significantly mediates the relationship between perceived status and competence (b = .05, SE = .03, 95% CI [0.01, 0.12]). Perceived status negatively affects irrelevant information (b = -.41, $t(120)$ = -3.08, p =.003) and irrelevant information, in turn, negatively affects outcome behaviour (b = -.13, $t(119)$ = -2.99, p =.003). Nevertheless, the results also show that even after accounting for the mediating role of irrelevant information, perceived status still has a significant direct impact on perceived competence (b = .39, $t(119)$ = 5.93, p < .001). Analysing the data in this way suggest that status can influence competence (supporting H3).

Finally, the anomaly that the mediation effects on the relationships between perceived status and the two DV's differed somewhat was explored further. As mediation and moderation effects can be aligned, the moderating effect of the two mediators was tested on the relationship between Brand-person congruence and the Perceived status of the ME. The results were highly statistically significant, see Table 6.19.

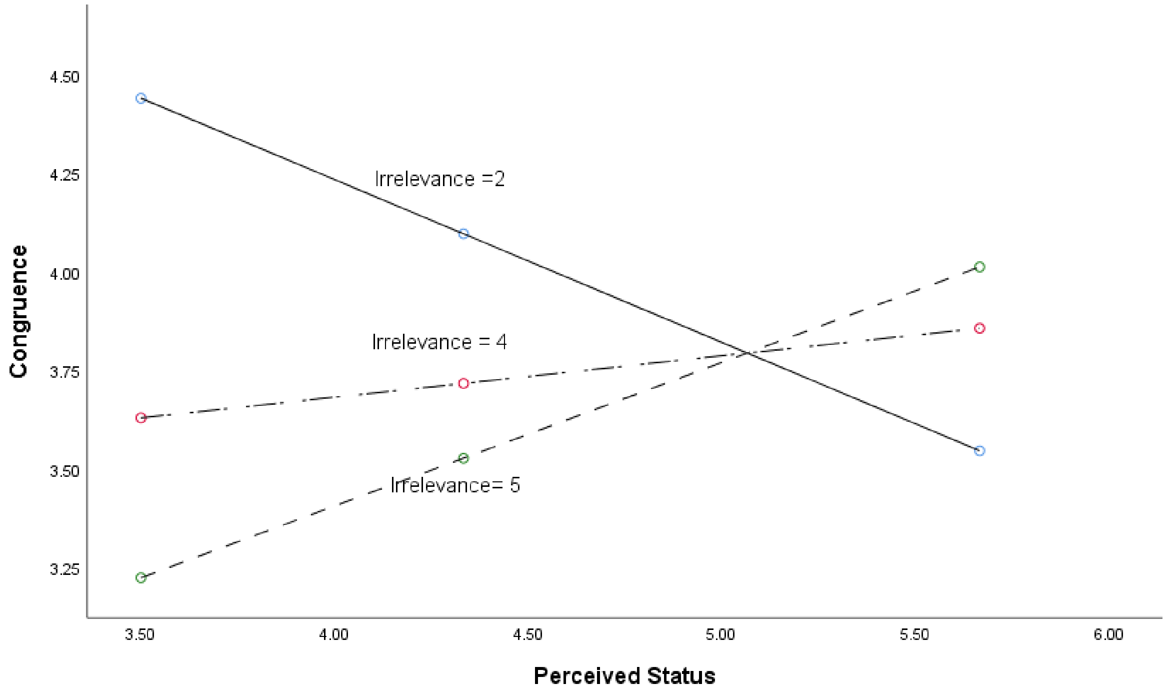
Table 6-19 -The moderating effect of irrelevant information

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	8.51	1.28	6.63	.0000	5.97	11.1
status	-.931	.273	-3.41	.0009	-1.47	-.391
irrel info	-1.31	.279	-4.70	.0000	-1.86	-.759
Int_1	.259	.062	4.19	.0001	.136	.381

As the table shows, the interaction effect between status and irrelevant information is significant ($p=.0001$) while the two terms themselves are also significant in predicting brand-person congruence. Figure 6-7 explains the statistics graphically. When respondents saw the information they were given as irrelevant (value 5) the relationship between perceived status of the business and their brand-person congruence was positive. While for those who disagreed that the information provided was irrelevant, in other words they saw it as relevant (value 2), the relationship between the perceived status of the business and their brand-person congruence was negative.

The finding is difficult to understand and could not be explained by examining differences in response to the perception that the business had provided too much irrelevant information by demographic (age, gender, race) or status seeking. One possibility is that the information provided was not seen as useful to those who want to associate themselves with a high status business. Brand person congruence correlated significantly with both status seeking (p=.006) and the perception of providing too much irrelevant information (p=.-012) but no moderation or mediation effects could be found linking all three variables together.

Figure 6-6 - The Relationship between Status and Congruence for different values of Relevance



6.3.5 Exploring the Survey Data from Study 3

In this section, a statistical modeling of all the variables in the final study is used and the test results of all the valid variables in the questionnaire are reported. The database for Study 3 contained a number of variables included as potential control variables for the main analysis, which was two-way ANOVA, the logical method to assess a 2x2 experiment. Most of these variables proved not to be significant in any analysis or to influence the ANOVA statistics by only improving their significance. Two-way ANOVA treats the data set as having 4 subsets of data. In this section all data is considered as a single file. The objective is to explore the data to see if there are any interesting relationships that could, for example, be useful in further work or in explaining some of the findings reported earlier in this chapter

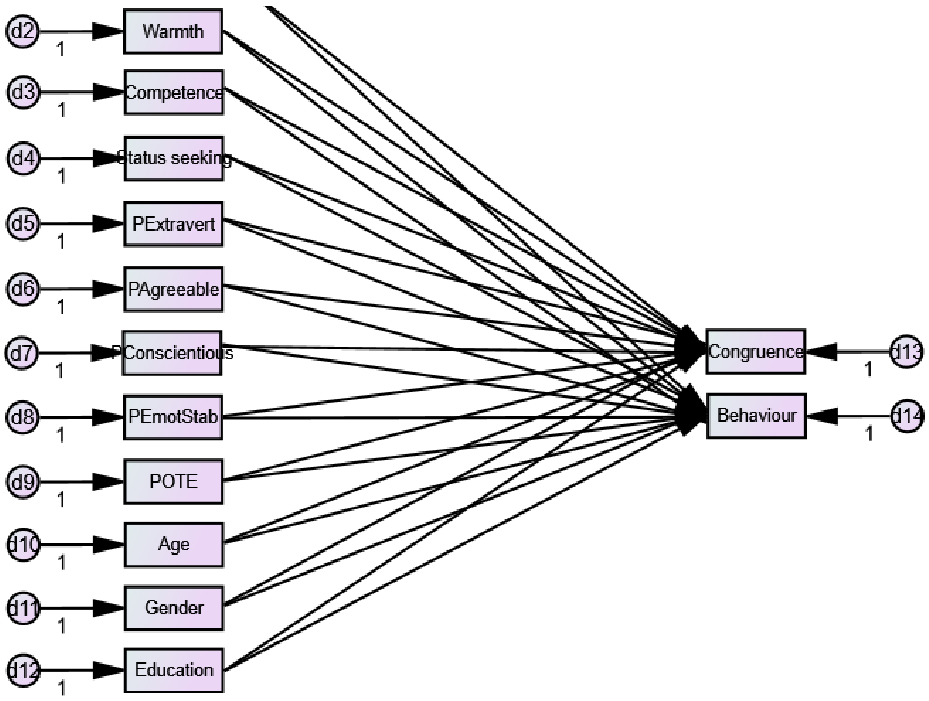
The approach was to use Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and specifically AMOS (version 27). SEM is often assumed to require a minimum sample size of 200 and 5 cases per parameter (Kline, 2015, p.11-12) although some have argued in support of smaller samples (Wolf et al., 2013). Here the sample size is of 122 respondents and the number of observed variables over 60. To meet this problem a full SEM was not attempted and instead the mean value of each variable was used in a path analysis. The aim of this analysis is to test the most complex model possible linking the variables measured in Study 3 and to derive a model which fits the data as best as possible. The following fit indices are included: Chi-square with degree of freedom (χ^2/d.f.), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Hoelter. They were selected to represent a sample of fit types as recommended by Kline (2015) and others.

Table 6-20 - Acceptance area of Fit Indices

Fit index	Recommended level	Source
χ^2/d.f.	< 3.000	(Kline, 2014)
CFI	> 0.900	(Byrne, 2001)
GFI	> 0.900	(Mulaik et al., 1989)
RMSEA	< 0.080	(MacCallum et al., 1996)
Hoelter 0.05	>200	(Kenny, 2015)

First each signal type (warmth, competence and status) was set to predict the two main outcome variables (behavioural outcome and person-brand image congruence). 9 control variables were then added (the 5 dimensions of human personality, status seeking, age, education and gender) as in Figure 6.7. Two variables included in the questionnaire were not included. These were two measures of values (the value of expression as (partially) described in Kim and Sherman (2007, p.1-11) and traditional values by Taormina and Shamionov (2016). Neither measure proved satisfactory in terms of an adequate Cronbach alpha.

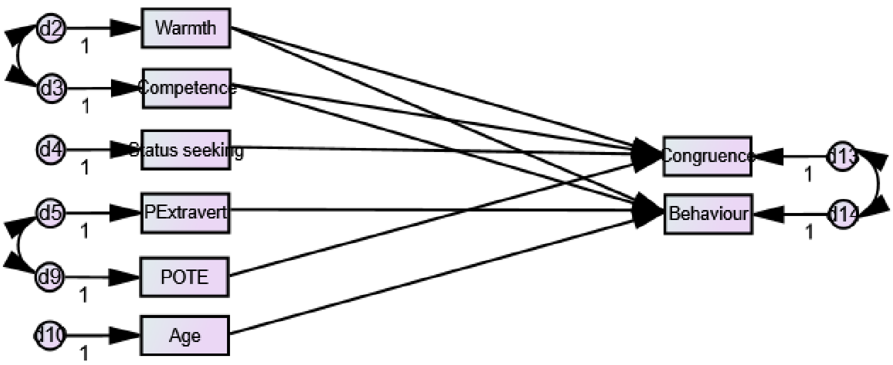
Figure 6-7 -The Initial SEM used to Model the data from Study 3



The initial model did not fit the data well (χ^2/d.f. = 4.2, GFI = .78, CFI = .31, RMSEA = .16, Hoelter 0.05 = 38). The fit was then improved using the modification indices. Covariances were added first connecting competence to both warmth and status and the two outcome variables to each other but the fit was still poor, due to non-significant links from many of the controls to the outcome variables (χ^2/d.f. = 2.191, GFI = .865, CFI = .751, RMSEA = .099, Hoelter 0.05 = 73). No other links that could be justified by theory were suggested by the modification indices. Non-significant links were then removed one at a time, each time selecting the least significant link. If all links from other variables to a variable were removed the latter variable would be removed from the model (including if the only link remaining was a covariate).

This process continued until there was a reasonable fit to the data (Figure 6.8). The model fits the data well (χ^2/d.f. = 1.339, GFI = .956, CFI = .972, RMSEA = .053, Hoelter 0.05 = 147). It represents the optimum model to predict the two main outcomes from the survey data and could be useful in future work by suggesting relationships that might be tested with larger samples. All the links in Figure 6-8 are significant at $p<.05$ other than those between Congruence and Competence and Congruence and POTE (the personality trait of being open the experience) where the significance levels were close to being significant $p= .06$ and considered close enough to be retained for the purpose in hand.

Figure 6-8 - The Optimum Model to fit the Survey Data in Study 3



The effects of the independent variables on the two outcome variables are shown in Table 6.21.

Table 6-21 - Standardized Total Effects

	POTE	age	PExtravert	status_seeking	competence	warmth
Outcome_	.000	-.186	.117	.000	.217	.403
Congruence	-.111	.000	.000	.155	.165	.435

Human-brand congruence and Outcome behaviour are both mainly predicted by warmth, a similar finding from the regressions presented in an earlier analysis in this Chapter. What is potentially interesting is the effects of the two personality traits, extraversion and open to experience. Personality did not emerge as a variable of interest in the earlier analyses but did here.

People who are “open to experience” (OTE) tend to be intellectually curious, creative and imaginative (Smillie, 2017). They tend to be more liberal politically (McCrae, 1996), and to be more open minded on issues such as diversity in society (Jost, 2006). The link to Congruence in the model is negative, which is surprising as the context is a new business selling gifts. The bivariate correlation in the database is also negative but not significantly so. This may suggest that the OTE personality represents someone who does not wish to be associated with the kind of business used in the experiment, but that any effects are small.

Similarly, the personality dimension of extraversion is nearly significantly associated with Outcome behaviour, but positively so. In the database the relationship is similar. Extraverted individuals are usually bold, outgoing, active, and high spirited, while less-extraverted individuals are quiet, passive, and less sociable (Digman, 1990). Relevant to the current work, Extroverts are more proactive (Wang et al., 2019) and would be more likely to react to the stimulus in the experiment by recommending to others for example. However, the effects are small in the context of the experiment as a whole.

Age was (b=-.270, s.e.=.860, p=.002) negatively related to outcome behaviour suggesting that older respondents were more positive about the new business than younger ones. One possible explanation is that older people have more experience and might them be more confident about dealing with a new business. Finally, status seeking was positively (b=.230, s.e.=.089, p=.010) related to congruence. This was the case in the main data base but only for the respondents who responded to the survey version where status had been manipulated, emphasising the danger of generalising from the analysis of the combined data.

Table 6-22 - Regression Weights

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Congruence	<---	warmth	.570	.116	4.90	***
outcome_behaviour	<---	warmth	.509	.111	4.61	***
Congruence	<---	competence	.267	.144	1.86	.063
Congruence	<---	status_seeking	.230	.089	2.57	.010
outcome_behaviour	<---	PExtravert	.054	.028	1.95	.052
outcome_behaviour	<---	age	-.270	.086	-3.14	.002
Congruence	<---	POTE	-.066	.037	-1.82	.069
outcome_behaviour	<---	competence	.338	.136	2.48	.013

In summary the SEM tends to confirm the earlier findings of Study 3, specifically the strong relationships between Warm and Competence and the two outcome variables but it emphasises the potential role of demographics and personality in any such work and the need to control for them in any such work to ensure that the effects found from an experiment are due to the experiment itself and not any differences between the characteristics of the respondents in each experimental group. The SEM provides a more global model than is normal for an ANOVA analysis and as such has made an additional contribution to an understanding of the data in Study 3. Future work which builds upon this thesis should consider using measures of personality, age and perhaps status seeking although it should be noted that including them did not significantly alter the conclusions.

6.3.6 Analyses of the Explanations of Perceived Signals

6.3.6.1 Status - analysis of thought protocols

Immediately after being asked to evaluate the ME for its status on the 6 items used for this measure, respondents were asked to explain their ratings. Almost all respondents provided substantial explanations or thought protocols. These were then downloaded and (after some typographical errors were corrected and translations made) content analysed.

UK Respondents with Basic Information Only

Of the 31 thought protocols provided by UK respondents who had been given just the basic information about the ME, 14 comments or parts thereof were coded as being too basic or lacking information for example:

> *"Although the items have been especially selected there is no indication what the gift ideas may be or how exclusive they are to that website."*
> *"There's nothing particularly special or unique about the website."*
> *"Very neutral and vague description."*

However, a number (6) commented that the impression they had gained was of a friendly company, for example:

> *"Their information seemed very friendly and approachable."*
> *"It was inviting, not intimidating."*
> *"Seems friendly and approachable."*

Three commented that (although they had been asked to rate the company for being prestigious and exclusive) they did not find them to be so, for example:

> *"The language doesn't indicate any high quality, or give examples of why this would be a luxury brand."*
> *"There wasn't anything to make me think the company was posh, prestigious or sophisticated."*

Chinese Respondents with Basic Information Only

The theme of a lack of information (21 examples) also dominated the responses from the 30 Chinese respondents who had read only the basic information about the company, for example:

> *"The company introduction is too general and abstract."*
> *"The information in the store introduction does not introduce information related to these characteristics."*
> *"No customer reviews, it is impossible to judge their credibility.".*

Two respondent's comments reflected the theme in the analysis of UK respondents (above) that the business seemed friendly and customer oriented:

> *"It gives a feeling of good service attitude."*
> *"The company cares more about satisfying customer needs."*

One reflected the theme of a lack of information to make a judgement on the criteria provided to evaluate status.

> *"It is impossible to judge whether it is "highly prestigious, reputable",*

UK Respondents with Additional Status Information

The analysis of thought protocols for the 30 UK respondents who had received the additional information that the company stocked brands such as Gucci illustrated the effect of providing such information. The main theme identified was of the company selling up market brands (18 mentions), for example:

> *"With names like Gucci, a shop will always be more upper class."*
> *"They have expensive and well- known labels attached to them. Like Gucci."*
> *"They stock the main designer brands."*

Interestingly there were only two codings around the theme of insufficient information (compared with the 14 from the UK respondents who were not told about the specific designer brands):

“I don’t have enough information to make a sensible judgement.”
“I don’t think it provides enough information.”

However, there were three quite negative comments which appeared related to the additional information:

“It seems more like a low- end business trying to sell high end goods as part of their range.”.
“I doubt the high- end brands are going to be genuine as I have no info about them or their reputation.”.
“They seem to be more expensive if they stock designer brands.”.

Chinese Respondents with Additional Status Information

Three themes were identified from the thought protocols from the 31 Chinese respondents who were told the company stocked Gucci and Armani product. The largest theme (15 codings) which respondents used to explain their ratings was of selling luxury brands, for example:

“Selling famous brand products.”
“Selling popular brands (from) all over the world, as well as top luxury brands.”
“It can be seen that the products provided by the company are more sophisticated.”

But some (6 codings) claimed they had inadequate information to judge, for example:

“It is impossible to judge whether the company is “prestigious, reputable and stylish and elegant.””
“There is no information to prove that this company is credible.”
“It is difficult to understand the credibility and prestige of the company from the introduction.”

And, as with the British respondents, the extra information had its negative effects on some (2 codings):

“I cannot trust a micro-enterprise that sells many famous high-end fashion brands.”

“At the same time operating so many luxury brands makes me doubt whether it is genuine or counterfeit, so my answer is doubtful.”

In summary, the thought protocols helped explain some of the more quantitative data. It is clear that the increase in status ratings were due, as the manipulation check suggests, to the addition of the information that the ME sold luxury brands. At the same time the same information made some respondents suspicious of the firm, helping to explain the lower ratings for Warmth (which includes being trustworthy) from those who were told about the association with luxury brands. Finally, there were both similarities and differences between what the British and Chinese respondents chose to say. Both groups who were given limited information about the brands the company sold complained about a lack of information to help them evaluate the company. These comments reduced markedly among those told the company stocked specific luxury brands but not so markedly among the Chinese group.

6.3.6.2 Warmth - Analysis of Thought Protocols

Immediately after being asked to evaluate the ME for its warmth on the 6 items used for this measure, respondents were asked to explain their ratings. As for status, most respondents provided substantial explanations or thought protocols. These were then downloaded and (after any typographical errors were corrected and translations made) content analysed.

Neutral Version UK

The dominant theme (15 codings for the 21 respondents) was that the first impressions of the firm were that they appeared warm and friendly.
For example:

“The description did make the business seem friendly and personal to some extent.”

“The language used made them seem friendly and helpful.”

“The description sounds very friendly and inviting.”

The next most prominent coding (6) were of more negative comments indicating the respondent lacked enough information to judge or needed to experience the business before they could judge, for example:

“I cannot know whether the business is reputable from this small section of information.”.
“I would have preferred more background.”
“I haven't shipped with them so I don't know if they can be trusted or not.”.

Finally, two comments were coded as representing an explanation that the company appeared customer oriented:

“They seemed like they really care about the customer.”
“They seemed to have the customers in mind.”

Neutral Version China

As with the British respondents the most frequently coded theme (8) was that the company appeared friendly, for example:

“The content of the store introduction seems that the company is friendly to users.”
“The words sound friendly.”
“The website description language is more friendly."

However, 7 codings also emphasised that some respondents found there was not enough information to form a full impression, for example:

“There is no way I can tell based on such short introduction.”
“Too little information, stay neutral.”
“The general introduction made my impression of them neutral.”

A number of comments (6) suggested that other respondents found that their first impressions were positive, for example:

> *"Self-introduction is quite professional."*
> *"The tone of the introduction was very polite."*
> *"The wording is cordial."*

A few (3), similar to the UK group deduced that the firm were customer oriented:

> "*The description of the company reflects the company's willingness to provide customers with high-quality customized services."*
> *"The introduction reflects the merchant's attitude of actively communicating with customers and helping customers purchase."*
> *"I feel that the company cares more about customer needs and satisfaction."*

Increased Status Version UK

The most frequently coded theme (13) was that respondents felt they lacked information or at least the sort of information they needed to judge whether the firm were honest and trustworthy, for example:

> *"Would have to buy from them before I could see how trustworthy."*
> *"There is no way that you can tell if they are any of the above from that statement, it would be more ideal to answer after a product has been delivered."*
> *"It's very difficult to get the feel of a shop based on their own description."*

The second most frequently coded theme (8) was quite negative and often linked to the company talking about selling luxury brands, for example:

> *"Mentioning the name of some of the products makes them seem as though they are a bit pretentious and not very warm."*
> *"They have expensive and well- known labels. I don't trust or like big companies that benefit from slave/child labour.".*
> *"General prejudice for upper class brand providers. Mostly they try to rip off people."*

However, another group of comments (6) saw the information as indicating a friendly company, for example:

> *"The tone was warm and friendly."*
> *"The passage provides a feeling of friendliness and sincerity."*
> *"Their tagline/intro appears friendly."*

Increased Status Version China

The comments from this group were on balance relatively negative. The most frequently coded group (10 codings) were to the effect that there was not enough information to make a judgment, for example:

> *"It is difficult to determine whether the value is trustworthy.".*
> *"Too little information to make accurate judgments."*
> *"It is not clear from the introduction whether this company is friendly or not. If you want to judge this, I will judge based on the store design and the attitude of the service staff.".*

However some (6 codings) found it possible to conclude that the information did paint a picture of a friendly business, for example:

> *"The tone of the introduction makes people feel sincere."*
> *"The company profile is very friendly, and the listed partners increase its credibility."*
> *"Stores selling top luxury brands should be trusted."*

And as with the equivalent British group there were some negative comments (6), for example:

> *"Expensive is not necessarily good"*
> *"Although the owner's introduction is very enthusiastic, I still doubt whether the goods in the store are trustworthy."*
> *"It should be expensive."*

Finally, a small group of comets were coded as indicating a customer orientation, for example:

> *"This kind of companies that help guests pick gifts and give guests ideas are service-oriented."*
> *"It feels like a company that attaches great importance to the needs of each individual customer."*
> *"The company's willingness to spend its own money to give back to customers shows that this company is sincere and enthusiastic."*

In summary, the thought protocols helped explain some of the more quantitative data and the drop in warmth evaluations when the information about the company selling luxury brands was introduced. To both groups of respondents, the effect of doing so was mixed. There were a number of comments about higher prices particularly from the Chinese respondents and from the British an antipathy towards luxury brands. The frequency of comments that the business appeared friendly fell from 23 in the group given the more neutral description of the company to 12 among those given the information including the association with the two luxury brands.

6.3.6.3 Competence - Analysis of Thought Protocols

Immediately after being asked to evaluate the ME for its competence on the 6 items used for this measure, respondents were asked to explain their ratings. As for status and warmth, most respondents provided substantial explanations or thought protocols. These were then downloaded and (after any typographical errors were corrected and translations made) content analysed.

Neutral Version UK

As previously many respondents felt that there was insufficient evidence to provide more than a neutral response. 14 codings were categorised as such, for example:

> *"There wasn't much given away that demonstrated the competency or actual skill set of the company."*
> *"More details would be needed to conclude how competent they are."*

“I don't know much about them hard to fully judge attributes.”

Others disagreed (9 codings) and explained that they could make a (positive) judgement about the firm, for example:

“They sound like they know what they are doing.”
“If they weren’t any of these the business wouldn’t do well.”
“They have good English and it’s well written.”

A few (3 codings) gave explanations on the theme of the company appearing to be customer oriented, for example:

“They seem to have customer interests at the forefront of decisions and are intelligent about the products and business ideas.”
“I think the description didn't put any pressure on the reader to buy from them.”
“They appeared willing to help customers find the right gift - it’s an intelligent model.”

There were no negative codings.

Neutral Version China

A similar number of codings from the data from Chinese respondents (14 codings) were identified indicating that may felt there was not enough data to provide a clear evaluation. Examples included:

“*Too little information, not sure.”*
“It is impossible to judge whether the company is Efficient, intelligent based on the description.”
“There is no relevant information in the introduction.”

As before, others (10 codings) felt they could make an evaluation of their competence and that this was a positive one. Examples included:

“Through the introduction, I can feel the confidence of the company.”

“The first image includes a wider range of users, and I feel it is more experienced.”

“The company can provide products suitable for various occasions, so I consider the company to be ‘competent, competent, and serious’.”

A few (4 codings) however took the opposite view, examples included:

“The company should work harder to polish the company introduction.”

“Based on the general understanding of the company. This company does not seem to excel.”

“The company’s impression to me is not very ‘elite’."

Enhanced Status Version UK

That there was insufficient evidence to form an opinion (including actual experience) about the competence of the business was a theme in the British group given the additional information and told that the company sold high end brands such as Gucci, but there were fewer such codings (9). Examples included:

“There isn't really any tangible information to determine the justification for their statements.”

“More information required to assess whether I should give more positive answers.”

“I suspect they would be competent, but only experience would determine that.”

Again, as previously there were others who felt they could make a positive assessment (8 codings). Their comments included:

“They show they are competent by putting detail into their descriptions.”

“The brands they sell are luxurious and for them to able to stock them I imagine they would somewhat need these qualities.”

“The way in which the sentences were formed without grammatical errors or spelling mistakes makes me think they are probably quite competent!”

However, others interpreted what they had read negatively (5 codings). Their comments included:

> *"It's hard to tell whether or not the company is competent purely on the basis of its attempt to affect prestigious and sophisticated façade."*
> *"I guess you are trying to sucker me with mention of designer brands. These mean nothing to me."*
> *"Companies that associate with others that use slave/child labourers have no conscience. That helps make them confident."*

Enhanced Status Version China

That there was insufficient evidence to form an opinion (including actual experience) about the competence of the business was again a theme in the group from China who had been given the additional information (13 codings). These included:

> *"There is very little information to judge the above characteristics."*
> *"Too little information to determine the company's capabilities."*
> *"I cannot judge this, I will judge based on the interaction between me and the staff."*

There were fewer negative comments (2 codings) which were:

> *"The high-end market is not necessarily efficient."*
> *"Although the introduction explains that gifts can be recommended for customers, it does not indicate the method (algorithm) used to complete this recommendation, so it is not Highly efficient, intelligent or skilled."*

Others felt they could make a positive evaluation on the company's competence (9 codings) often linked to the company selling luxury brands. Examples included:

> *"The introduction of high-end products shows that the user group is confident in their consumption ability."*
> *"The company has the strength to give customers high-end gifts."*
> *"Shops that sell top luxury goods should be more confident."*

In summary, the thought protocols helped explain some of the more quantitative data from Study 3. The competence ratings did not change significantly due to the addition of the status signal of selling up-market brands. One explanation from this analysis is that respondents in all groups often noted that there was insufficient evidence to evaluate the competence of the firm and these codings did not change that much across the groups. However, the Chinese respondents who were given the extra information often cited the association with high-end brands as their reason for giving their competence ratings.

The numbers of codings in each category did not vary much between the 4 groups. The most significant grouping was that of lack of evidence to make a competence evaluation and this might explain why the competence evaluations did not change with the introduction of the status signal. The two- way ANOVA used to predict competence from the survey version and the nationality of the respondent (Section 6.3.2.2) showed that neither variable was close to being significant in predicting competence. In fact, the model was not significant overall.

The analyses of the thought protocols tell a slightly different story with the focus of the explanations for why respondents giving the ratings they did varying between the four groups. The Chinese respondents appeared more influenced by the status signalling in making positive remarks, while the British respondents often cited the luxury brands as a reason for being negative. Overall, the comments split fairly evenly across the four groups between those who felt there was insufficient information to make a judgement on competence and those who felt able to be more positive.

6.4 General Discussion

Signalling status emerged from the qualitative work in Studies 1 and 2 as not uncommon for MEs. The most relevant theory (SCM) argues that status underpins competence. However, the experimental study in this Chapter revealed that signalling status can lead to a negative effect on consumer evaluation and has no boost for perceived competence. This finding is compatible with Malter (2011) as consumers holds higher uncertainty towards the ME business, signalling high status affiliations might bring penalties for the brand. The results are also compatible with (Garcia et al., 2018) who found that status signalling by a friend can have negative effects on the opinions of his/her peers.

The finding adds to our understanding on the signalling of MEs' brand image. The status signal can have both positive and negative effects when MEs communicate to their markets. In the experiment for the small gift company the status signal worked, in that it produced an increase in status but not in competence. There was an unexpected reduction in warmth. As warmth explains expected behaviour best, using the status signal reduces potential sales overall.

Signalling status reduces behavioural outcome behaviour regardless of context, country (the UK and China), age, gender, education level. However, perceived higher prices and giving too much irrelevant information were shown to have strong mediating effects. The two mediation effects on their own give slightly different pictures including that providing irrelevant information would be more damaging than the perception of higher prices. When somebody sees status as an indicator of charging higher prices or providing irrelevant information, they are less likely to buy. But if they do not see the increased status as either higher price or irrelevant information, they will be more likely to buy, suggesting a segmenting effect.

In theory, status is supposed to underpin competence (Fiske et al.,1998) however this idea was not supported by the main experiment. When people believe status signalling is providing irrelevant information, they will not be likely to see the relationship between status and competence.

An implication for MEs is to use signalling status with care, as it may be interpreted by consumers as higher prices (as well as irrelevant information for ME branding). Some consumers will see a status signal as meaning higher prices, and will be less likely to engage with the ME, but some may still engage seeing the signal as relevant to them.

Returning to the hypotheses:
H1: Signalling status will have a positive influence on customer attitudes.
Is not fully supported in that the average effect of signalling status on both outcome behaviour and brand-person congruence were negative. Only for those who were not influenced by the idea of higher prices appeared to be positively influenced.
H2: Chinese consumers will react more positively than UK consumers to status signalling.
While the main effects of signalling status were similar for both countries, the effects differed as expected. The hypothesis is supported.
H3 Increasing the perceived status of an ME increases its perceived competence.
The hypothesis was not supported which has implications for the application of SCM thinking to a commercial context which are discussed in the next chapter.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has reported and discussed the findings from an experimental design. Based on the effect of status on consumer brand engagement behaviour (Davies et al., 2018; Fiske et al., 2002), I empirically tested whether if an ME signals status to potential customers in two countries, the UK and China, then what would be the change in consumer attitude using two measures.

Signalling status was found not to increase consumer perceived competence of an MEs' brand. It appears that consumers may think the signal as irrelevant information. For others who do not see this, they are still likely to think the ME brand is competent.

Signalling status can have both positive and negative influences on consumer behaviour towards an ME brand, and this is relevant for both the UK and China. When consumers perceive a status signal, they might think that this indicates expensive prices and/or even worse as irrelevant information and are less likely to engage with the brand. The final chapter in this thesis will aim to summarise all three studies and their contribution to theory and practice.

Chapter 7 Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this research was to investigate how MEs communicate their brand image to their markets, particularly in relation to signalling brand associations. The specific research objectives were to:

1 To identify the characteristics and issues relating to microenterprises in their brand image communication.

2 To evaluate critically models and theories relevant to microenterprises in coping with brand image communication.

3 To explore owner-manager views and real-life practices related to brand image communication in an international context.

4 To experimentally test the adoption of relevant models and theories.

5 To formulate recommendations for microenterprise branding.

This Chapter will revisit the research objectives above in order to answer the questions: whether and how MEs signal warmth, competence and status to their markets, summarise the findings of the research work and offer conclusions based on the findings. The previous chapters reporting Studies I-III were large, hence the summary in this chapter. Recommendations for future research will be discussed, in terms of how to progress this research study. Importantly, the contribution of this research to the development of MEs' brand communication will be clarified. By adopting this structure, it is intended that the research work can be judged on whether or not the objectives stated at the beginning have been met, including consideration of the value of the study. The limitations of the work will also be discussed.

7.2 Research Objectives: Summary of Findings and Conclusions

7.2.1 Research Objective 1: Characteristics of and Issues for MEs

The literature review in Chapter 2 identified the limited capacity of MEs in terms of their marketing activities, external contacts and customer base (Inan, 2016) making it difficult for them to cope with issues including a lack of brand awareness (Kennedy & Wright, 2016; Merrilees, 2007), and to build their corporate brands (Juntunen et al., 2010; Sandbacka et al., 2013). Yet, the picture is not clear as to how exactly MEs should communicate their brands to their markets. There is concern as to whether MEs should rely upon SME practice (Merrilees, 2007). MEs can be quite tiny (less than 10 employees) and SMEs quite large and resource rich by comparison. The SME sector can include companies with up to 250 employees and an annual turnover of up to EUR 43 million in 2003 values (EU, 2003 and Table 2.2 Chapter 2). An SME perspective might also neglect the essential role of the brand of their owner-managers (Bromley, 2001) as in practice brand image can be dominated by that of its leader (Muteswa, 2016; Parmentier et al., 2013) in this case the owner-manager of the SME. However, while the literature on the personality of the entrepreneur is extensive (Mitchell et al., 2002), it does not appear to extend to provide a direction for the branding of the typical ME. There is limited research on the issue of branding in MEs (see Rode & Vallaster, 2005) and a knowledge gap that this thesis aims to help to fill.

7.2.2 Research Objective 2: Models and Theories

Chapter 2 also reviewed the literature on marketing communication and branding as potentially relevant to this thesis. Buttle (1995) was used as a key reference to understand the origins of current thinking on marketing communication. His work paints a picture of models which describe the communication process, emphasising the need to understand that a message from one party will be decoded by its recipient but not necessarily as the sender wants it to be.

The review in Chapter 2 discussed the introduction of the idea of integrated marketing communication in this century with an emphasis on ensuring that all communication from a company is coherent (Kitchen and Burgmann 2015). That same literature also emphasises the need to focus on the brand itself when thinking about communication (Madhavaram, et al., 2005) so that the brand image becomes central to marketing communication. This thinking was valuable for my thesis in that it led me to focus on brand image as a central part of my work. The model of marketing communication this suggested was of an ME communicating its brand imagery to the market.

Chapter 2 included a review of the main method of measuring brand imagery, that of brand personality. Aaker's work published in 1997 has been influential not only in providing a way of thinking about brand image and of measuring it, but also what brand image or personality is in terms of its dimensions (Cian, 2011). Given the prominence of brand personification in the literature explaining the success or otherwise of individual and corporate brands (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013), it might have been logical to adopt this approach to image measurement. However, Aaker's model consists of a large number of measurement items and other researchers have added to the list of both items and dimensions (Davies et al., 2018).

Recent work, to which Aaker herself has contributed (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010), has the potential to simplify her original model by focussing on two or perhaps three dimensions instead of the original five. The work is within the field of social cognition which argues that humans assess other humans along two dimensions labelled as warmth and competence (Fiske, et al., 2018) or agency and communion (Abele & Hauke, 2019). The work of Fiske and others, the Stereotype Content Model, has been extended and adapted to explain how humans judge brands (Kervyn et al., 2012) and including corporate brands (Aaker et al., 2010).

Consequently, SCM thinking holds that entities with humanistic associations (including brands and corporate brands) are automatically judged for their ‘warmth’ (trustworthiness, sincerity, supportiveness) and their ‘competence’ (effectiveness, efficiency) (Fiske, 2018; Kervyn et al., 2012). This implies that all branded entities will be similarly evaluated, including MEs. Furthermore, all brands, again including MEs, should ensure that they provide information about their warmth and competence to avoid being judged by potential customers using whatever information they have available. Thus, the SCM provides a model of marketing/brand communication which should be relevant to MEs. As far as I can tell the model has not been tested in this context.

Chapter 2 also considered one other area of theory to help justify the use of the SCM, that of signalling. For enterprises, signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) suggests that businesses learn which signals they should give to the market and tactically deal with (Mishra et al., 1998) in branding decisions (Erdem et al., 2006). This implies that MEs and their owner-managers will learn that they should be signalling warmth and competence. Signalling theory and the SCM were then the main theoretical perspectives adopted in this work.

There are however issues in applying the SCM to a commercial context. The status associations (prestigious, respected) of the entity being judged are also included in the SCM model but as an antecedent to competence judgements; in other words, status is used to help make the competence judgement. However, Davies et al. (2018) hold that status makes its own, independent contribution to image and not just via competence if at all.

In summary, SCM related theory puts forward warmth, competence and status as valid judgemental dimensions used by all stakeholders including consumers. This implies that all businesses, including MEs, should learn to signal their business warmth, competence and status to their market when promoting their image. From SCM theory such imagery will be particularly important when the customer first encounters the business.

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of the literature relevant to the potential relevance of a cultural dimension. Culture can influence how a product or service is received and evaluated (Kotler et al., 2020; Kim & Sherman, 2007). This thesis adopted a cross cultural perspective for two related reasons. First that it would add to the generalisability of any findings if similar results were obtained in more than one country/culture. Second the symbolism of status associations with a brand varies between the two countries chosen to locate the empirical work, China and the UK (Roth, 1995).

7.2.3 Research Objective 3: Owner Views and Practices

Three studies were conducted for this thesis with the views and practices of MEs and their owners being the empirical focus in the first two. In Study I, reported in Chapter 4, 14 owner-managers were interviewed in person about how they saw their brand image communication. The interview transcripts were analysed using Nvivo software. A key conclusion was that owner-managers were concerned to signal warmth, competence and status as the literature suggests (Fiske, 2018; Kervyn et al., 2012; Davies et al., 2018) but that competence was often their main focus with status the least mentioned, which was somewhat surprising. In Study II reported in Chapter 5, the content of 66 ME's websites was content analysed again using Nvivo to test and extend the findings from Study I. The focus was on the content of the 'Who we are' section of their websites. Three samples were used, one of those MEs who had entered a local competition in the UK, a more nationally representative sample in the UK and a similar sample in China. Again, competence signals seemed to dominate, and status signals were the least prominent even among the first group who might be expected to be more status conscious as doing well in the competition was rewarded with a status symbol.

Studies I and II confirm that MEs do aim to communicate warmth (good nature, support and generosity) and particularly competence (quality, proficiency, experience) as expected from the SCM (Fiske, 2016) and its adaptation to the context of branding (Kervyn et al., 2012). All three of the dimensions/themes that might be expected from the SCM as further adapted by Davies et al. (2018) to include status/prestige could be illustrated by examples such as “affiliations with prestigious organisations” from the empirical interviews and website content. However, respondents were less forthcoming on examples of using or recognising status issues compared with warmth or competence.

From study II, a clear picture emerged of 66 MEs in two countries (44 in the UK and 22 in China) using all three of the theoretically grounded dimensions of brand image in their self-promotion, with competence being the most emphasized. Although there was no significant country difference and not all MEs signal status, status is clearly signalled for most samples. MEs signal status by communicating educational attainments/qualifications (see also Kraus et al., 2011; Mattan et al., 2017), quality (Piazza & Castellucci, 2013) as well as wealthy resource affiliations/luxury conspicuousness (see also Han et al., 2010). However, it is noted that not all MEs signal status.

As summarised (see Table 7.1 below), for interview themes coming from Study I (interviews) and Study II (websites), competence and warmth are signalled frequently, whereas status is less frequently signalled.

Table 7-1 - Studies II- Summary of data

Codes/Group	14 Interviews	22 TYC, CN	22 FAME, UK	22 HSAE, UK	Sub-total	Total
Warmth	59	112	125	90	327	396
Competence	69	293	257	138	688	747
Status	31	68	73	87	228	319

The findings of this investigation complement those of earlier studies on SCM theories (Davies et al., 2018; Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn et al., 2012) and signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). In practice, MEs communicate their business warmth as consumer care and relationship, competence as quality and experience, and status as qualification and prestigious group affiliations.

The pre-eminence of competence signalling in both studies was unexpected. There are at least two possible explanations. First, prior work has shown that smaller businesses, in comparison with larger businesses, can be stereotyped as less competent but higher in warmth (Yang & Aggarwal, 2019). MEs might sense this and seek to compensate by emphasising their competence and not promoting the warmth they would be assumed to possess. Another explanation is that owner-managers do not appreciate the need to promote their warmth (trustworthiness, supportiveness, sincerity) seeing competence as a more objective basis for their self-promotion.

It is possible that the sample might be responsible for a misleading result, as the number of MEs surveyed across both studies totals only 80. However similar results emerged from both studies which adopted quite different research strategies. No differences were apparent between the two countries. If the sample is seen as being one of market signals, rather than of companies, then the total number of signals identified was large, some 1462 in total across the two studies. The difference between the warmth and competence signals (see Table 7.1) would be highly significant.

The frequency of status signalling is lower than for either warmth or competence apart from in the HSAE sample. The latter data were obtained from a study of the websites of 22 companies who had entered a competition, where doing well would mean being able to include a prestigious crest on their website and letter heading. The implication is that these companies were concerned to obtain prestige and saw it as useful commercially. Others however did not appear to signal prestige (21 of the 80 companies in studies I and II), at least not in the section of their websites where such communication might be expected or when interviewed. During the interviews for

Study I, it was more difficult to obtain examples of status signalling from respondents than examples of either warmth or competence signalling.

The main issue to emerge from the more exploratory phases of this research was then the issue of Status signalling. This is clearly relevant from a practitioner perspective as a quarter of companies were identified as not using status signals. It is also relevant from a theoretical perspective in that in the original SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) status is seen as an antecedent of competence judgements which are then used to make an overall judgment, while in other work (Davies et al., 2018) it is seen as a dimension of equal relevance to those of warmth and competence when influencing overall judgment. This issue would be tested in Chapter 6 and Study III.

The main conclusion from the exploratory work in Chapters 4 and 5 was that there was evidence that MEs signal warmth, competence and status, but that status signalling was not used as much as either warmth or competence signalling and that competence signalling dominated.

7.2.4 Research Objective 4: Experimental Testing

While studies I and II confirmed the relevance of the SCM, they raised the issue of the role of signalling status. According to the original model (Fiske, 2018; Kervyn et al., 2012) the role of status signals should be to promote an image for competence, while Davies et al., (2018) argue that status makes its own, direct contribution to how a business is seen and to outcomes such as purchase intention. Given the importance to both theory and practice, Study III tested the effects of signalling status using an experimental design. Samples of both British (n = 61) and Chinese (n = 61) consumers were used to test the signalling effects in an on-line survey.

The experiment found that the use of a status signal changes perceived warmth and in turn attitudes towards purchase and brand person congruence. But while the signal of luxury brand association worked for a retailing ME in increasing its perceived status, increasing its status produced a reduction in warmth and in outcomes such as purchase intention, a finding compatible with what has been labelled as the status signal paradox (Garcia et al., 2018) but not with the SCM. The negative effect could be explained by the mediating effect of two factors, whether respondents thought the company would be too expensive and whether they thought it was providing too much irrelevant information. The negative effect was not so pronounced among the Chinese sample. I concluded that signalling status can appeal to some customers but can at the same time make others less likely to engage with the business because of the effect of making it appear too pricey.

The conclusion for the Research Objective is that MEs should signal status to consumers with care. Signalling status through emphasising an association with luxury goods for example may reduce consumer purchase intention. Consumers may interpret the signal as high status yet associate it with higher prices or even irrelevant information, which could lower their willingness to buy from the business enterprise. The finding might also explain therefore why many MEs do not signal status, for fear of the status signal paradox (Garcia et al., 2018) and that some stakeholders at least would expect higher prices.

Study III also allowed testing of whether status signalling would be used by people to inform their judgments of an entity’s competence, a tenet of the SCM. While the addition of a status signal enhanced status evaluations significantly in both countries, it did not enhance perceived competence. In fact, perceived warmth was reduced and as warmth was responsible for consumer attitudes, the signal had an overall negative effect on such outcomes. In regression neither competence nor status made a contribution to predicting either consumer attitude tested.

The study then makes a contribution to the general application of SCM thinking to a branding context. The data and its analysis can be used to question the generalisation that status perceptions are used to inform competence judgments (see Fiske, 2018; Kervyn et al., 2012). Warmth judgments however were shown to dominate overall judgement supporting the arguments made for the predominance of warmth over competence (Cuddy et al., 2013).

Finally, the data created for Study III were reanalysed, as a whole, using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The model produced helped emphasise the potential role of control variables in analyses such as those presented here. In the 2-way ANOVA analyses the general effect of introducing control variables was to increase the significance of the main variables. In the SEM the potential relevance of personality, status seeking and age in the context of the current work was further highlighted.

7.3 Recommendations Related to Conclusions

Managerial Implications

Most businesses are SMEs, and most of them are MEs. Many inexperienced entrepreneurs face the possibility of business death and still may find it hard to learn from others' failures and successes. It could be helpful for them to learn about best practice in branding and marketing communication and this work should help by providing data.

Prior work suggests there is an issue of lack of awareness of branding for MEs. From this, the first recommendation to be made is that entrepreneurs should be aware of: what brand associations (feelings and perceptions) the consumer can hold toward them/their businesses. Also, no matter if they are chosen to be "the face" of their businesses, they should be aware how they can influence the image of their businesses by what they include in any communication, such as a website about themselves and their company.

Entrepreneurs could usefully learn what signals might work best when communicating to their market. From this work, in the context of ME practice, signalling warmth could be interpreted as signalling “good intention, supportive and generous” whereas the signal of competence could be seen as including “quality, proficiency, experienced”. The quotations from other ME owner-managers and ME websites might be useful material for other MEs to consider. The framework of the Stereotype Content Model may be too academic for owner-managers, busy with making their business a success, but the main principles of ensuring signals of warmth and competence to their markets are easy enough to accept.

The question of whether or not to signal status is more difficult to address. Many MEs appear not to signal status. One explanation from my work is that this can make the business appear expensive. Work with larger concerns (Davies et al., 2018) suggests that an image for being prestigious and of status is however generally beneficial. Here it was not but it is unclear whether this is specific to MEs. Clearly MEs need to consider status signalling with care and should not make the assumption that presenting an up-market image will inevitably be good for their business.

Chapter 8 Limitations, Future Research & Contribution to Knowledge

8.1 Limitations

This study is aimed at advancing understanding of Micro Enterprises' Brand Image Signal. Despite the theoretical and practical contribution to knowledge, there are some limitations noted.

I only used limited sample sizes in all studies and only one business type in Study 3. Secondly, I only selected luxury brands as a status signal, and there are other status signals, ones that might produce different results. Thirdly, there could be other business types in the ME sector which could represent a different story. Fourthly, the context for the experimental design only considered new potential consumers rather than regular consumer with repurchase intentions.

8.1.1. Sampling

The samples for this research included both business to business and business to consumer examples. The sample for the UK MEs in Study II was randomly selected but that for China was selected to match the UK sample. There were problems in obtaining the China sample in that many Chinese MEs lack a website. Indeed, the sample in Study II are of MEs with websites and so are not necessarily representative of MEs in either country. The sample sizes in both studies were not large although the number of signals gathered was very large in Study II.

The work was conducted in two quite different countries and similar findings emerged in Studies I and II. In Study III the reactions of Chinese and British respondents were overall similar but differed in scale which adds confidence to the findings. Future work would be useful with larger samples and in ones in other countries. Future research could also examine other variables, for example, MEs of different ages (i.e. years from starting) or the age and/or gender of the owner-manager to see if these influence their brand signalling.

8.1.2. Longitudinal Study

Signalling theory suggests that businesses learn which signals work for them. It would be interesting therefore to explore how the content of individual ME websites changes over time. One implication from the current work is that MEs might change their signalling over time and for example drop status signals in some circumstances as they learn what works or what does not work for them. The content analysis reported in this thesis focussed on three dimensions of imagery as the objectives included testing SCM theory in the context of MEs. Other dimensions could be included in future work from the range of dimensions being identified or a new scale developed which is specific to the branding of MEs. Finally, it might be useful to compare the signalling of larger small businesses with that of MEs to explore any size effects.

8.1.3. Researcher's role and Interpretation

Other limitations include that Studies I and II involved the author in making judgements and in particular about whether a specific group of words represented a signal or not and if so, which category it should allocated to. The work was conducted in the UK and in China. The author is fluent in both English and Chinese/Mandarin (his native language) but it is possible that translation errors were made. However, the author's work was checked by his supervisors, one a native English speaker and other a native Mandarin speaker, fluent in English, and so such issues are not expected to have influenced the findings of the research.

Respondents to Study I may have exaggerated or misspoken when describing their business and its marketing. Some triangulation was possible, but one example is quoted in Chapter 4 where a customer had a very different opinion of a business compared with that of its owner. The interview with the owner-manager was nevertheless included verbatim in what was analysed. However, and as explained in Chapter 5, the author recognised that he was gathering the opinions of owner managers as to what they did, rather than observe what they really did. Study II considered only information on ME websites which was more objective. However not all the website content was analysed and no account was taken of, for example, visual imagery.

Study III used an experimental design which has advantages conceptually over regression when inferring proof of a relationship. However, and as with most such designs, the context provided to respondents is hypothetical. A real-life context might have produced differing results.

As with most social science research, replication by other researchers would be useful to confirm the findings shown here.

8.2 Contributions to Knowledge

Comparing and contrasting my findings against the work of other researchers, the review of literature made it clear that there is an acute lack of in-depth investigation into the practice of brand image signalling among MEs. No similar research could be found where the researcher has carried out a series of studies within the micro enterprise sector, interviewing owner-managers on brand communication, and analysing the practice of brand signalling let alone experimentally testing the effects of specific signals. This thesis then makes a contribution to the literature on ME marketing (Inan, 2016; Pitt & Kannemeyer, 2000; Skinner, 2019; Merrilees, 2007; Kennedy & Wright, 2016; Juntunen et al., 2010; Sandbacka et al., 2013) and also to a practical understanding of ME branding which should be useful to owner-managers.

Prior work on ME marketing has focussed more on the individual owner-manager within the literature on entrepreneurship. Applying the SCM to the marketing of MEs is believed to be an original approach. It provided a useful framework that generated a series of insights into how owner-mangers think about their businesses. It then adds to prior work testing the application of SCM thinking to other marketing issues (e.g. Aaker et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2012; Davies et al., 2018) as well as to that on ME marketing.

I expected from prior work and theory, largely undertaken and developed in the context of larger companies, to find that MEs would signal their brand's warmth, competence and status to their market (e.g., Kervyn et al., 2012; Davies et al., 2018). The results matched many of these expectations, but I found that not all MEs signal status. The findings also challenge a key tenet of the SCM that status signalling works by promoting competence (Fiske, 2016; Kervyn et al., 2012) an outcome which adds to the literature questioning such a generalisation (Brambilla et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2018). Signalling status can lead to negative results as found in work on human branding (Garcia et al., 2018) a finding which can help explain why many MEs do not signal status, as they have learnt or sense the downsides of doing so.

SCM thinking which argues that warmth judgments are more important in shaping decision making about a target than are competence judgements (Cuddy et al., 2013) was supported by the analysis in Study III. It will be interesting to other researchers aiming to apply SCM thinking to marketing issue that an increase in status resulted in a significant decrease in perceived warmth. While this helped explain the reluctance of some MEs to signal status, it was not totally as expected in that only a minority of respondents appeared to be positively influenced by the status signal.

For practitioners they should consider whether they provide a balanced set of signals to their markets as signals promoting competence were much more frequent than those promoting warmth. In the data from Study III the outcomes including willingness to purchase depended most on an image for warmth suggesting ME's might give more attention to such signals. Signalling status may be relevant and useful only to a minority of ME's, those whose businesses might benefit from an expectation of higher prices.

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Appendix 1 Questionnaire Type for Experimental Study (Neutral Version)

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey, your participation is very much appreciated. This survey is part of a study aiming to explore how very small businesses market themselves.

You will be asked to imagine that you have come across a small business on line and to read some information about it. There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer as honestly as possible.

We will also be asking you questions about yourself. All the information provided in the survey is confidential and anonymous and will not be traced back to you. The data will only be used for our analysis.

Please answer the questionnaire by ticking the appropriate box (or boxes). It should take around 8 minutes to complete.

Please read the following carefully twice as there will be one or more check questions later in the questionnaire.

Please imagine that you are interested in buying a gift for a friend you want to impress. You have found a business on-line who stock what you are interested in. Because the business is new to you, you want to know more about them before you buy from them. From the home page on their website you have clicked on the tab 'Who we are' where they describe themselves as follows:

> **We aim to have a range of gifts to suit a wide range of age groups and budgets. Our gifts are selected for all kinds of event, birthdays, celebrations and many other special occasions. Please browse through our website and see if we have what you are looking for or for ideas that might suit the occasion and those you are buying for. When we created our business, we wanted to offer something different, and we hope you like what you see.**

Your Impression of the company

Thinking about the company please evaluate them for being

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Prestigious	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
2. Exclusive	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
3. Sophisticated	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
4. Reputable	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
5. Posh	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
6. Glamorous	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐

7. Please explain why you gave the ratings you chose

Click or tap here to enter text.

Thinking about the company again please evaluate them for being

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. Friendly	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
9. Well-intentioned	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
10. Trustworthy	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
11. Warm	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
12. Good-natured	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
13. Sincere	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

14. Please explain why you gave the ratings you chose

Click or tap here to enter text.

Thinking about the company again please evaluate them for being

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
15. Competent	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
16. Confident	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
17. Conscientious	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
18. Efficient	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
19. Intelligent	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
20. Skilful	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

21. Please explain why you gave the ratings you chose

Click or tap here to enter text.

Your expectation on prices charged

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
22. I would expect this company to give value for money	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
23. I would expect this company would be more expensive to deal with than other businesses selling similar products	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
24. I think the prices charged by this business would be higher than those charged by similar businesses	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about your views of the business

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
25. I feel that my personality and the personality of this business are very similar	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
26. I think I would feel a lot in common with other people using this business	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
27. I feel that my values and the values of this business are very similar	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

Your intentions towards the business

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
28. I would recommend this business to friends and colleagues	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
29. If I wanted a gift, I would seriously consider buying from this business	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
30. I think I would enjoy working with this business	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
31. I think this company is trying too hard to impress the customer.	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
32. I think the company provided too much irrelevant information.	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

Some questions about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
33. I like buying gifts for others	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
34. I buy presents for others quite a lot	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
35. I think a lot before I buy something for someone else	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about you

Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Please select a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.

I see myself as

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Neither Agree Nor Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
36. Extraverted, enthusiastic	**1**☑	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
37. Critical, quarrelsome	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
38. Dependable, self-disciplined	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
39. Anxious, easily upset	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
40. Open to new experiences, complex	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
41. Reserved, quiet	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
42. Sympathetic, warm	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
43. Disorganized, careless	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
44. Calm, emotionally stable	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
45. Conventional, uncreative	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐

More questions about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
46. I express my feelings publicly, regardless of what others say	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
47. I do not like to talk about my thoughts to others	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
48. Freedom of expression is one of the most important rights that people should have	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
49. People place too much value on the expression of ideas	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
50. I live by traditional values at home	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
51. I live by traditional values because I respect society	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
52. I live by traditional values because it is the right thing to do	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
53. I live by traditional values because they are important	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
54. I live by traditional values to preserve society	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
55. I live by traditional values because it benefits the community	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
56. I want my peers to respect me and hold me in high esteem	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
57. Being a highly valued member of my social group is important to me	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
58. I would like to cultivate the admiration of my peers	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
59. I enjoy having influence over other people's decision making	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
60. It would please me to have a position of prestige and social standing	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
61. I care about how positively others view me	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
62. I don't care whether others view me with respect and hold me in esteem	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
63. I am not concerned with my status among my peers	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐

Some basic demographics

64. What is your age?

☐Less than 20 ☐20-29 ☐30-39 ☐40-49 ☐50-59
☐60 and above

65. And your Gender?

☐Female ☐Male

66. At what stage did you finish full time education? Please select one box only (if you are still in education please select the stage you are at currently).

About 16 (GCSE O level, CSE, etc.)	☐
About 18 (GCSE A level, OND, etc.)	☐
Undergraduate degree (BSc, BA, etc.)	☐
Postgraduate degree (MSc, MA, MBA, PhD, etc.)	☐

67. Did we mention a gift business at the beginning of the survey?

Yes☐ No☐

This survey forms part of research being conducted by a research student at the University of Chester. Thank you for your help in completing the survey. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact Dian Wang by emailing d.wang@chester.ac.uk

Appendix 2 Questionnaire Type for Experimental Study (Increased Status Version)

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey, your participation is very much appreciated. This survey is part of a study aiming to explore how very small businesses market themselves.

You will be asked to imagine that you have come across a small business on line and to read some information about it. There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer as honestly as possible.

We will also be asking you questions about yourself. All the information provided in the survey is confidential and anonymous and will not be traced back to you. The data will only be used for our analysis.

Please answer the questionnaire by ticking the appropriate box (or boxes). It should take around 8 minutes to complete.

Please read the following carefully twice as there will be one or more check questions later in the questionnaire.

Please imagine that you are interested in buying a gift for a friend you want to impress. You have found a business on-line who stock what you are interested in. Because the business is new to you, you want to know more about them before you buy from them. From the home page on their website you have clicked on the tab 'Who we are' where they describe themselves as follows:

> **We aim to have a range of gifts to suit a wide range of age groups and budgets. Our gifts are selected for all kinds of event, birthdays, celebrations and many other special occasions. Please browse through our website and see if we have what you are looking for or for ideas that might suit the occasion and those you are buying for. We sell upmarket brands such as Gucci and middle market brands such as Coach, and so we hope you like what you see.**

Your Impression of the company

Thinking about the company please evaluate them for being

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Neither Agree Nor Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
1. Prestigious	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
2. Exclusive	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
3. Sophisticated	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
4. Reputable	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
5. Posh	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
6. Glamorous	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

7. Please explain why you gave the ratings you chose

Click or tap here to enter text.

Thinking about the company again please evaluate them for being

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Neither Agree Nor Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
8. Friendly	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
9. Well-intentioned	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
10. Trustworthy	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
11. Warm	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
12. Good-natured	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐
13. Sincere	**1**☐	**2**☐	**3**☐	**4**☐	**5**☐	**6**☐	**7**☐

14. Please explain why you gave the ratings you chose

Click or tap here to enter text.

Thinking about the company again please evaluate them for being

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
15. Competent	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
16. Confident	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
17. Conscientious	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
18. Efficient	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
19. Intelligent	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
20. Skilful	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐

21. Please explain why you gave the ratings you chose

Click or tap here to enter text.

Your expectation on prices charged

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
22. I would expect this company to give value for money	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
23. I would expect this company would be more expensive to deal with than other businesses selling similar products	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
24. I think the prices charged by this business would be higher than those charged by similar businesses	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about your views of the business

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
25. I feel that my personality and the personality of this business are very similar	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
26. I think I would feel a lot in common with other people using this business	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
27. I feel that my values and the values of this business are very similar	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

Your intentions towards the business

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
28. I would recommend this business to friends and colleagues	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
29. If I wanted a gift, I would seriously consider buying from this business	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
30. I think I would enjoy working with this business	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
31. I think this company is trying too hard to impress the customer.	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
32. I think the company provided too much irrelevant information.	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

Some questions about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
33. I like buying gifts for others	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
34. I buy presents for others quite a lot	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
35. I think a lot before I buy something for someone else	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about you

Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Please select a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.

I see myself as

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
36. Extraverted, enthusiastic	1☑	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
37. Critical, quarrelsome	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
38. Dependable, self-disciplined	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
39. Anxious, easily upset	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
40. Open to new experiences, complex	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
41. Reserved, quiet	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
42. Sympathetic, warm	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
43. Disorganized, careless	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
44. Calm, emotionally stable	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
45. Conventional, uncreative	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐

More questions about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
46. I express my feelings publicly, regardless of what others say	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
47. I do not like to talk about my thoughts to others	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
48. Freedom of expression is one of the most important rights that people should have	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
49. People place too much value on the expression of ideas	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
50. I live by traditional values at home	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
51. I live by traditional values because I respect society	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
52. I live by traditional values because it is the right thing to do	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
53. I live by traditional values because they are important	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
54. I live by traditional values to preserve society	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**
55. I live by traditional values because it benefits the community	**1☐**	**2☐**	**3☐**	**4☐**	**5☐**	**6☐**	**7☐**

More about you

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
56. I want my peers to respect me and hold me in high esteem	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
57. Being a highly valued member of my social group is important to me	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
58. I would like to cultivate the admiration of my peers	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
59. I enjoy having influence over other people's decision making	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
60. It would please me to have a position of prestige and social standing	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
61. I care about how positively others view me	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
62. I don't care whether others view me with respect and hold me in esteem	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐
63. I am not concerned with my status among my peers	1☐	2☐	3☐	4☐	5☐	6☐	7☐

Some basic demographics

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☐Less than 20 ☐20-29 ☐30-39 ☐40-49 ☐50-59
☐60 and above

65. And your Gender?

☐Female ☐Male

66. At what stage did you finish full time education? Please select one box only (if you are still in education please select the stage you are at currently).

About 16 (GCSE O level, CSE, etc.)	☐
About 18 (GCSE A level, OND, etc.)	☐
Undergraduate degree (BSc, BA, etc.)	☐
Postgraduate degree (MSc, MA, MBA, PhD, etc.)	☐

67. Did we mention a gift business at the beginning of the survey?

Yes☐ No☐

This survey forms part of research being conducted by a research student at the University of Chester. Thank you for your help in completing the survey. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact Dian Wang by emailing d.wang@chester.ac.uk